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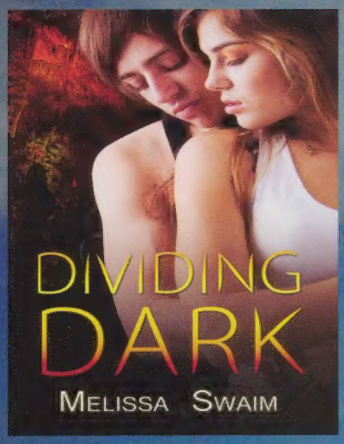

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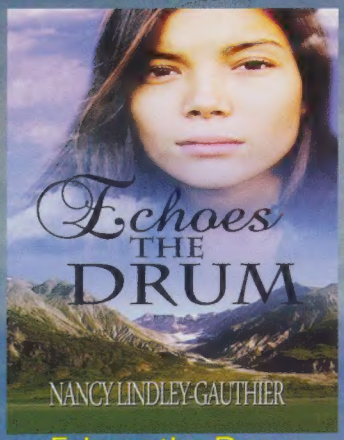

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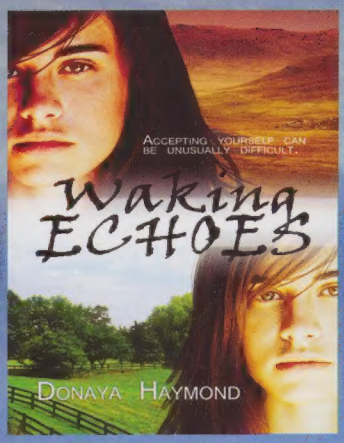

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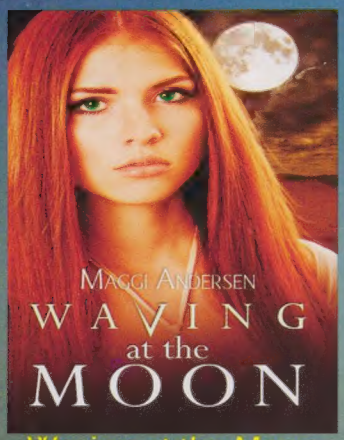

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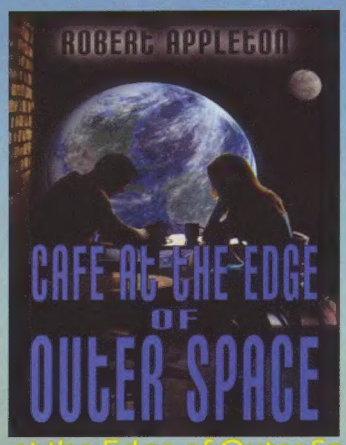

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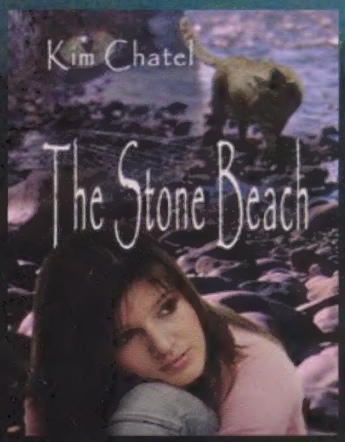

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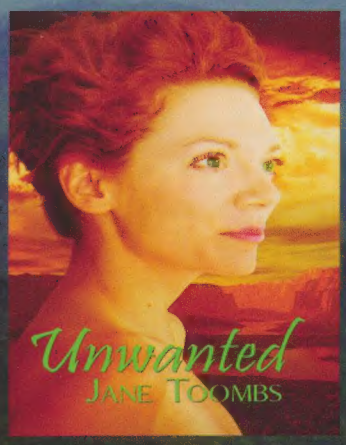

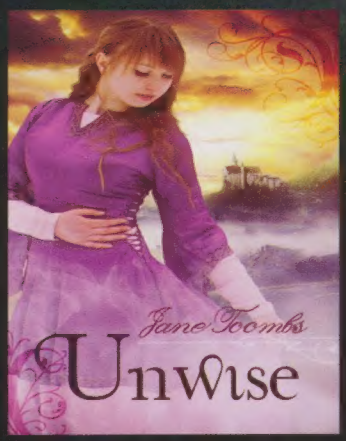

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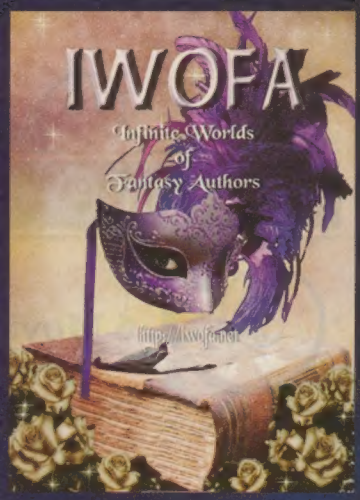

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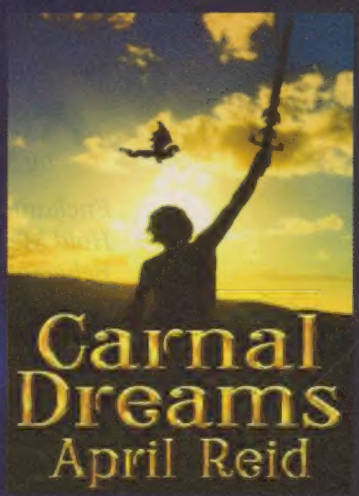

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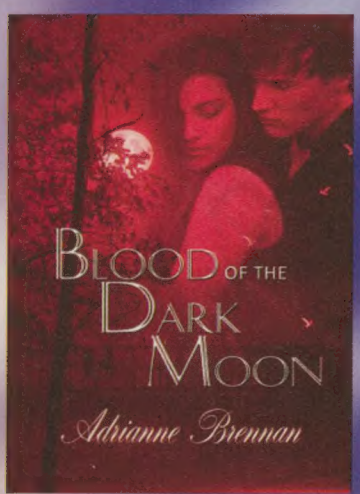

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by Adrianne Brennan
ISBN: 978-1936222070

Amanda is about to fulfill a legacy that began over thirty years ago and ended in tragedy. Can she learn the truth about her identity in time to help others and find happiness in her new life with her lover and sire, Jesse?

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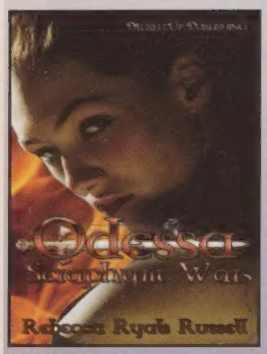

Seraphym Wars
By Rebecca Ryals Russell
YA Fantasy

While fighting inner demons resulting from a near rape at age 16, Myrna now 18, must fulfill her destiny as a Vigorio in the battle between Seraphym and Demons.

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By Christopher Hoare
High fantasy

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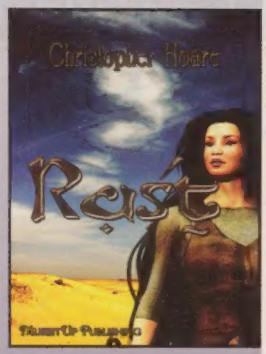

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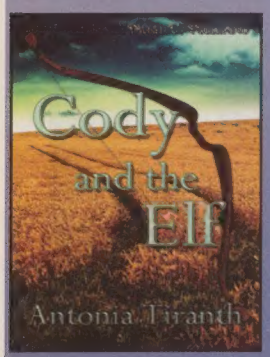

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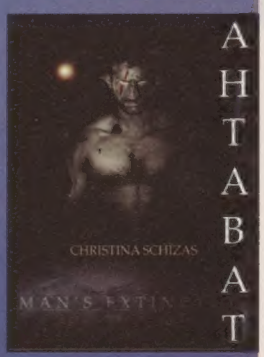
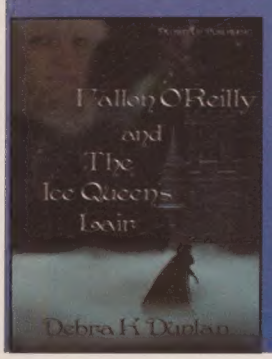
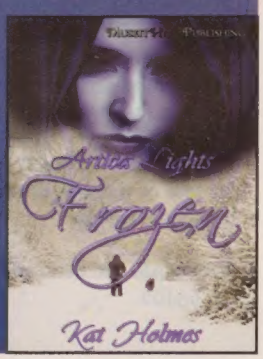




Fallon O'Reilly and the Ice Queen's Lair
By Debra K. Dunlap
YA Fantasy
ISBN 978-0-9865875-2-8
Fallon O'Reilly and her wheelchair-bound cousin strive to defeat the great evil threatening Alaska's hidden magical communities.

Frozen
By Kat Holmes
Paranormal Fantasy

Brent Larkin came to Antarctica to study penguins. He didn't come looking for either adventure or romance. But when a freak storm blows in and he loses his way, that's exactly what he gets.



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The Best Foreign Horror Movies in Recent Years

by Resa Nelson

In the 1990s and into the early 2000s, Hollywood buzzed with excitement over American remakes of foreign horror movies like The Ring and The Grudge. Movies made in other countries often produce images that are fresh and new to American audiences because they evolved from a culture alien to ours. Within the past few years, Sweden, Spain, and South Korea have produced innovative new horror films. With services like Netflix and on-demand TV movies, it's easier than ever to find and watch great foreign movies that can be far more satisfying than anything you'll find in a multiplex. Here's a sampling of some of the best that have been released during the past few years.

The Host (South Korea, 2006)

The Park family owns a food stand on the banks of Seoul's Han River, a popular and crowded recreation area. Without warning, a bizarre monster rises out of the river's waters and attacks the panicking crowd. Ultimately, the monster grabs the Parks' teenage daughter and swims off with her. Stunned, her family must now figure out how to find the monster and rescue her.

The Host
Movie Poster

However, along with everyone else who survived the attack, the Park family members are sent into quarantine by the army, whose officials have a good idea about what created the monster. Meanwhile, the teen has survived and found a safe hiding place in the monster's makeshift lair. Using a cell phone, she calls her family to let them know she's alive. But they must find a way out of quarantine in order to rescue her.

The Host is a rich and poignant horror film. The early sequence in which the monster rises out of the river and wreaks havoc has moments that could have been directed by Alfred Hitchcock. The interaction among the Park family members feels fresh, surprising, and often funny. At the same time, the family dynamics cross international boundaries. It's easy to relate to this family and the horror they face. The captured teen girl is smart and resourceful. Her grandfather is kind, her father is slow witted, and her mother is gone. But she has an unemployed uncle, and an aunt who has won medals competing in archery. Despite their differences and bickering, they will do anything to save the girl's life.

The Host comes from Joon-ho Bong, one of the best new directors to come along in years. His more recent film is *Mother* (2009), about a woman whose mentally challenged twenty-eight-year-old son is accused of a murder she's certain he couldn't commit. Convinced the police are simply interested in closing the case, she begins her own investigation to discover the real culprit. The deeper she delves into her search, the more disturbing and horrifying the film becomes.

Another of Bong's films is *Barking Dogs Never Bite*, a black comedy that animal lovers should avoid. It tells the story of a college lecturer longing for a professorship, and his relationship to the dogs that go missing mysteriously in the apartment complex where he lives.

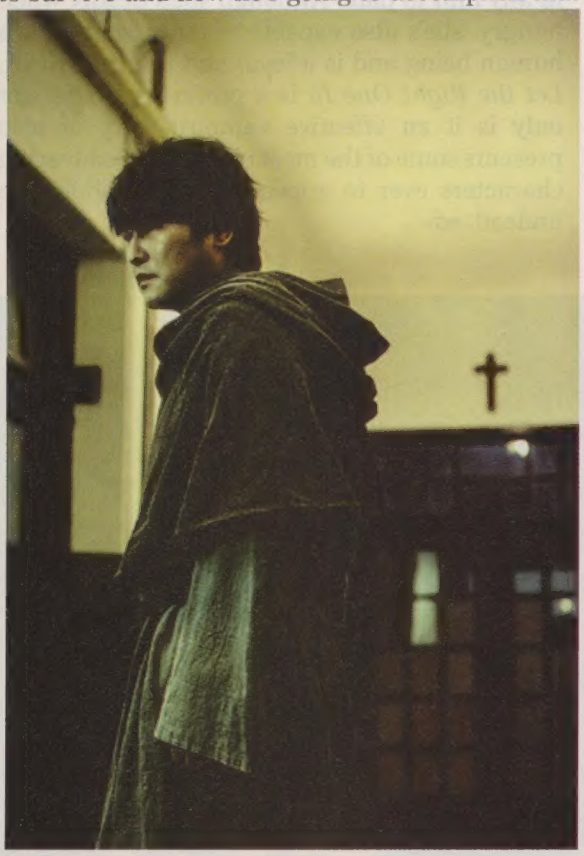
Although *Mother* and *Barking Dogs Never Bite* aren't fantasy horror films, anyone who admires *The Host* will appreciate Bong's other work.

On opposite page:
Top and bottom images are from *Thirst*.

Thirst (South Korea, 2009)

Fans of vampire movies who have grown weary of the recent American movies and TV shows about them should consider *Thirst*, which offers a unique and different spin. The "ick" factor is high, but the story is so fresh that anyone with a strong stomach should consider this film.

A priest volunteers as a guinea pig in a long-term experiment that researches a vaccine meant to cure a deadly disease. All of the other volunteers die, and the priest is the sole survivor. However, part of his experience accidentally turns him into a vampire. He's still a priest, but now he has to wrestle with the fact that he needs to drink blood to survive and how he's going to accomplish that task. The local townspeople have no idea he's a vampire, and they see his survival as a miracle. Secretly, he becomes aware of growing desires that he longs to quench, which only grow worse when he begins to spend more time with an extended family that enjoys his company, and he gradually learns of their dysfunctional ways.



This is a movie with unexpected twists and turns rarely found in vampire movies. It's sometimes bizarre, sometimes erotic, sometimes gross, but always interesting and the character of the priest is compelling. If you think you've seen it all when it comes to vampire movies, check out *Thirst*.

REC (Spain, 2007)

Hollywood remade *REC* as *Quarantine* (starring Jennifer Carpenter of TV's *Dexter*) soon after the original film's release. "REC" presumably refers to the recording button, because the entire movie is shown from the point of view of a hand-held video camera.

The story takes place in Barcelona, where a young female TV reporter and her cameraman go on assignment to shoot a piece on the daily routine at a local fire station. The reporter checks out the mess hall, plays basketball with firefighters, and hopes for the alarm to sound so she can follow them on a call. She gets her wish and follows the firefighters into an old and elegant apartment building. Concerned tenants meet them in the foyer, awakened from their sleep by the screams of an elderly female neighbor.

The reporter follows a few police officers and firefighters up a broad, winding staircase and into the neighbor's apartment. Inside, they find the woman bloodied and confused. Chaos breaks loose when the woman attacks one of the men, nearly ripping his throat out.

As everyone races back downstairs, they discover officials have locked and barricaded the apartment building so that no one can escape. The tenants, police officers, and firefighters (as well as the TV reporter and her cameraman) are trapped. Something has infected the elderly woman, still in her apartment, and everyone else inside the building is now quarantined with her until further notice.

The TV reporter, who began her evening working on this story intended as light entertainment, now realizes she has a hot news story on her hands and tells her cameraman to keep rolling and record everything. But as the

evening wears on, it becomes clear that the situation is far more horrific than anyone could have predicted.

Quarantine seems to be nearly a frame-by-frame replica of *REC* with one exception: the story's epiphany is a little more detailed and slightly different in the original film. Both movies are chilling and relevant, but *REC* gets credit for coming up with a story that feels like true urban horror.

The Orphanage (Spain, 2007)

Don't confuse this with *The Orphan*, a recent American movie. Guillermo del Toro is credited as a producer while Juan Antonio Bayona directed this story set in Spain. Laura grew up in an orphanage and returns thirty years later with her husband Carlos and their adopted son Simón with the dream to restore the now-abandoned building as a home for disabled children. Simón claims he has invisible friends, but Laura is so preoccupied with the restoration that she gives little thought to what he says until her son vanishes inexplicably. Laura begins to sense the presence of spirits in the orphanage. Desperate, she consults a medium to investigate her son's strange disappearance.

The Orphanage

The Orphanage isn't just a scary movie. Its story shows great compassion, something rarely found in American horror films.

Let the Right One In (Sweden, 2008)

Whether you've see the American remake, *Let Me In*, or not, this Swedish original (based on the novel by John Ajvide Lindqvist) is one of the best horror films in years and was voted Movie of the Year by *Empire* magazine.

Set in a Stockholm suburb, the story revolves around Oskar, a lonely twelve-year-old boy who's the object of local bullies. Oskar is too afraid to fight back. Instead, he dreams of vengeance each night when he goes outside in the courtyard of the apartment building where he lives. One evening he sees a new family move into the apartment next door: a man and his daughter Eli, who appears to be Oskar's age. They immediately cover their windows, and Eli's absence from school indicates she spends her days at home.

Eventually, Eli appears in the courtyard at night, but she's standoffish, and strikes Oskar as peculiar. Despite the frigid Swedish winter, Eli doesn't wear a coat and doesn't mind the cold temperature. But the two gradually strike up a friendship. After some time, Oskar confides in Eli that he's being bullied, and she encourages him to defend himself.

In the meantime, we learn that Eli is a vampire, and her guardian has begun killing the locals in order to provide her with blood to drink. Soon, things go wrong, putting Eli's survival at risk.

Eli may be the most sympathetic vampire in any film to date. Although she's deadly when hungry, she's also capable of truly caring for a human being and is a loyal and faithful friend. *Let the Right One In* is a powerful movie: not only is it an effective vampire story, it also presents some of the most unique and endearing characters ever to appear in a film about the undead.

Let the Right One In

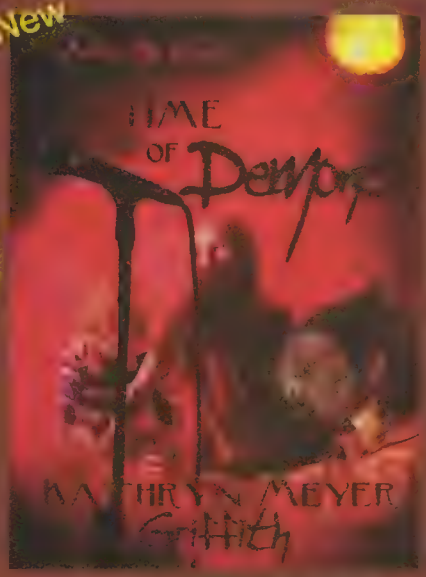
The works of Kathryn Meyer Griffith spanning thirty-nine years of paranormal fantasy with no signs of slowing down.

New

Just when I thought I had it figured out, there would be new twists and turns.

--Robert Nelson's Amazon Review

New



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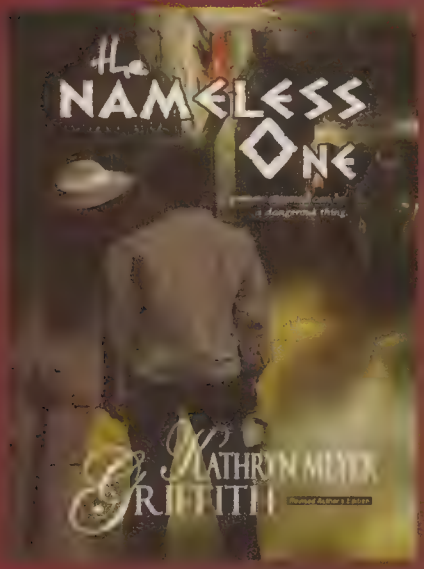
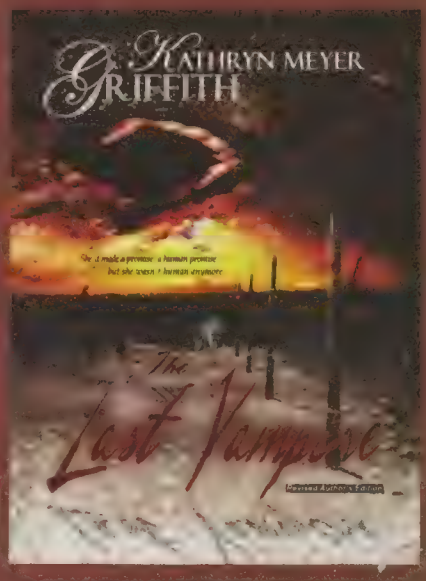


"In *A Time of Demons* Kathryn Meyer Griffith crafts a story that is part Christian eschatology, part mystery, and part down-to-earth, good ol' fantasy adventure."

--Floyd Brigdon from She Never Sleeps reviews



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Look for re-releases of your favorites in 2011.

Dominic Harman: Bleeding Dreams

by Karen Haber

A Q&A with Realms of Fantasy

Dominic Harman is an award-winning British artist and illustrator best known for his science fiction, fantasy, and horror book jackets and CD covers. Twice a winner of the British Science Fiction Association Award, as well as the Asimov's Readers' Award for best cover artist, Dominic has worked for all the major publishers including HarperCollins, Del Rey, Pyr, and Subterranean Press. His work adorns the covers of books by Clive Barker, Philip Pullman, Naomi Novik, and Terry Pratchett. His vivid covers for reissues of Barker's *Hellraiser* series are especially well known, and have been reissued as art prints.

Recently we took the opportunity to talk to him about his work.

ROF: How long have you been a professional artist?

DH: Coming up to 14 years. I still wonder where all the time went!

ROF: Why did you become an artist?

DH: I think every child uses crayons and paints but I carried on past childhood. My brother was into heavy metal music and I used to see these amazingly imaginative covers by Derek Riggs for albums by Iron Maiden and some of the covers for Kiss albums. Those certainly fired my imagination in the early years. Later I had a bad time in school and I think art was a good way of shutting it all out and expressing myself through that medium.

An early memory of my artistic endeavors: My brother used to come home from watching horror movies with friends and describe to me in detail the most violent and gory scenes. I got out the pencils and colored crayons—mainly red!—and illustrated what he told me about: scenes like a man being impaled on a wall with a knife—a famous image scene from *Halloween*—and a man being burnt alive—from *The Burning*. I guess I was meant to become an illustrator. I was working from a brief—from my brother—even back then! I took my efforts to school and worried all the teachers. My parents were not amused.

ROF: What is your educational background? (Art degrees, etc.) Also, what medium do you use, and why?

DH: I studied at art A level [in England] in 1990 and took a foundation course on the South Coast of England, but I decided that I simply had to graft and build up a strong portfolio; I needed to learn a solid technique but the college courses at the time seemed to offer little in what I was after. So I thought: *learn it myself*!

At the time, it seemed clear to me what was needed was practical application. So I stayed home, worked at an art shop and a night club for several years while I was practicing *hard*, and I did meet a few pro artists who gave me some valuable advice that helped pave the way forward.

As regards medium, I began with oil, then moved on to acrylic and airbrush. Later, I realized that, commercially, going digital was the way forward. Looking back I think it was a good move and one that made perfect sense. I still paint in oils for my own personal projects but I also love digital because it is so immediate and great for alterations and revision.

ROF: Can you expand on your choice and use of media?

DH: In the early years, I worked with oil and acrylic, utilizing the traditional techniques of painting. Now I employ a wide range of media such as pencil, photography, oil and acrylic techniques, scanned images and textures, elements designed in 3D software, and finish digitally with Photoshop and Painter. I think the way I work now makes it so much easier for

Terry Pratchett's Igor

DOMINIC HARMAN

Cabal at the Gates of Midian

crossovers. If you look at my style and approaches I do have a fairly broad range of tastes and that's reflected in my work.

ROF: What was your first sale?

DH: My first professional sale, at the age of 23 in July 1997, was to the British magazine *Interzone*. Mark Harrison, a big fantasy artist at the time, introduced me to the mag. *Interzone* was a great stage from which to show my work. My first big book deal was a cover for Kelley Armstrong's *Bitten*, for Orbit books in London, That was an amazing commission to get and for such a lovely writer! I really enjoyed reading her books and it was a pleasure to come up with the icon-driven covers for her.

ROF: Who are your favorite artists/influences?

DH: An early influence was the work of Derek Riggs, who created the album covers of the British rock band Iron Maiden. I remember poring over the details of the record covers, working out the technique. I had the lovely opportunity to meet him when I working in an art shop many years ago—a good place to work if you happen to like mucking about with paint and a mahl stick. He was very encouraging and thought I had potential. We have remained friends and we always discuss the different sides of the businesses and new techniques when we have a catch-up. But my inspirations and influences also included the works of the surrealist and classical painters, Velázquez, Caravaggio, and Rembrandt, among others, and also in the fantasy scene: Frank Frazetta, Boris Vallejo, and Simon Bisley, to name a few. I was first made aware of Frank Frazetta's work by the Conan covers on the books that my brother used to read. At a later age I saw Boris Vallejo's book, *Mirage*. This cemented my desire for a career in SF and Fantasy art. Since then there have been many artists that I have admired and met and they all have played a part in my development.

My commercial styles are quite different now than what first inspired me, which I find interesting! For my own pleasure I do canvas paintings that have the narrative and figurative approach of the old masters. Maybe one of these days I'll post a few of these on my website for people to see.

ROF: What are your favorite subjects and why?

DH: I am happy to illustrate a mixture of jobs. I think that it's very healthy to have a broad range of commissions/interests to be involved in, to keep you fresh. To keep doing the same thing will obviously help you improve on that single thing but the double edge to that is you might eventually get stale with the same subject matter. A steady flow of fantasy, SF, horror, and also a healthy peppering of merchandising/advertising work really helps keep things lively.

ROF: It sounds like you have always been a fan of dark fantasy and drawn it from an early age. What is its appeal and how do you deal with the implications of horrific imagery (i.e. gore, blood, etc.)? Does the subject matter ever make you shudder or is it a technical puzzle to be solved? What horrifies you? Is there any subject you would refuse to illustrate?

DH: Yes, I have been a fan of dark fantasy and horror since I was a child, watching the "video nasties" as they used to be called. Films like *From Beyond, The Thing* [John Carpenter's remake], *Demons*, and *Hellraiser*. (Obviously, I'm a big fan of John Carpenter's and Clive Barker's work.)

I think it was escapism and also very exciting to watch a scary, rollercoaster of a movie and walk away unscathed. It was also so imaginative! The fantasy horror is what I loved the most.

Nothing really makes me shudder in horror apart from when I read *Hannibal*. The end scene was something that did shock me. Of course, it was crime fiction, and treated in the most realistic way. Maybe that's why.

Of course, I love science fiction and fantasy too! They are all great to illustrate and I have a passion for them all. I would love to contribute something to a classic-monster horror flick, to put my slant on the visuals. As for something that I would refuse: I wouldn't do anything that would be a direct attack on religion—towards *any* religion—although I'd like to create a vision of Hell, say, from the perspective of the Damned. I do like Bosch's and Memling's dark medieval visions. Some films/art I like do have some elements of that [when you are dealing with horror within a religion, like Vampires for example, crosses, churches, etc.], but it's how it's handled and within what context is so important.

ROF: Could you discuss the challenges of illustrating dark fantasy/horror?

DH: Well, generally gore is a no-no simply because it's too much for most people to bear. In my experience there is only a limited market for

it. So you try and go for the surreal, the sinister, and the damn-right weird as opposed to full-on graphic scenes. It's better to make something look creepy than all-out gory. That said, I would love to do a zombie painting. I don't know who would buy it, though! Maybe George A. Romero?!

ROF: What work have you done that you're especially proud of and why?

DH: Painting the covers for reissues of Clive Barker's *The Hellbound Heart* was a personal favorite of mine. I love Clive's work. For this I had to come up with a non-figurative concept. At first I thought of a porcelain heart with grooves and cracks and the nails hammered in, but I decided to go for a fleshy white heart with the same cut grooves in the flesh and nails driven in. I think it made a more gruesome effect without the need for blood. Also, doing a cover for H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* was fantastic, a great honor. I was given the chance by the publisher to have more freedom with my designs, so I didn't have to stick so rigidly to the descriptions. I made the Martians more insectile, with a wasp/fly head, a spider's foreleg, and a cricket's back legs. It's on my website.

I also enjoyed painting a cover for Eric Brown's *Engineman,* a reissue of his space opera. I wanted to create an epic feel to the cover, with the Saturn-type planet and the starship's jet plumes echoing the planet's rings. I've also just done the cover for *The Noise Revealed* by Ian Whates with hulking space ships, eons' old ancient derelicts crash landed on gigantic asteroids. He's another great writer in the making. Another writer I have illustrated—and whose stories I love—is James Enge for *Wolf Age.* And I might just add that I also enjoyed a great opportunity recently to create a classic barbarian piece for Subterranean Press.

ROF: What are you working on now?

DH: A great cover for Eric Brown's novel, *The Kings of Eternity,* which is set in Greece in the year 2000 and in England in 1935. It's a fine novel about a group of immortals, how they became immortal, and what it might mean to live forever. Also a great cover for Garth Nix & Sean Williams, involving rats, insects, and tornados! Very exciting. I'm doing another *Temeraire* cover for Naomi Novik which I love! It was such a pleasure to create the designs for her wonderful first series for Dell, and I had a great chance to re-imagine them for the Subterranean Press series. Not many get the chance to revisit such fertile ground! I think that because the *Temeraire* novels are so popular, people have begun to get to know me over in the States, which is great.

ROF: What are your goals for your work/career?

DH: I would love the chance to put my slant on any Robert E. Howard and H. P. Lovecraft stories. I've loved their writing since I was a child.

I am also very interested in creating a themed book of art, either classic science fiction or sword and sorcery. I love the old SF and fantasy pulps of the '30s and '40s: the cover artists back then were the unsung heroes of the field, in my opinion. It would give me a chance to explore and develop some interesting ideas I have, maybe even in collaboration with a writer.

ROF: What has been especially helpful to you in your career?

DH: Well, I think the computer has been a revelation, not only to the world in general, but also in commercial illustration. I know there still are people out there who reject the medium as an art form, but in the commercial workplace it does make perfect sense, and it makes sense to

Swords and Dark Magic

me. I guess it's like photography and the camera: when it was first invented it was greeted with suspicion and rejection by some people in the art world. In some people's opinion it wasn't artistic or creative! But of course now we all know it's an accepted medium in the art world, and what counts is how you use it. I guess it takes time for people to accept a new medium.

The internet has been a massive revelation too. For example, when I'm researching something I can just tap in and find out all about it. I used to go to the libraries and *hope* they would have something about whatever I was researching—most of the time they had very little. And, of course, you feel connected when on the net. I think I've had more work from other countries simply because the net breaks down those obvious geographical barriers. The strange thing is that I've never actually met most of my clients in person, so it does remove the sense of personal, one-to-one relationships even while opening up the marketplace for me and everybody else.

ROF: Do you listen to music while you work?

DH: Music is very important to me. When I work, I generally listen to film scores and music by, for example, Thomas Newman, Christopher Young, Joby Talbot, Basil Poledouris, or Jerry Goldsmith, Enigma, Jean Michel Jarre, and Tangerine Dream. I sometimes buy a soundtrack without having watched the film so as not to be influenced by the imagery. The music is often interesting in its own right. I do tend to have music in the background when I'm trying to get

New Worlds

Engineman Painted as the cover for the book with the same name by Eric Brown.

into the right mindset for a hard day's work: it's easier with beautiful music playing.

ROF: Best advice you ever received?

DH: I've had advice from many teachers and artists—and even a famous guitarist, Vinnie Moore, of UFO fame!—over the years, but mainly it comes down to desire and the will. If you have the will you'll find a way. Some respected people in the field told me when I first started out that it's pretty much a closed shop but it didn't stop me from keeping on going until I found the key! My advice to any aspiring artist is simply this: work out what you want specifically from the area of what you want to get into, then find people that have done it and done it well, and then learn from them on how they achieved it. You must be flexible in your approach, as things change, as life does. Be prepared also to take some crap and rejection from people; but don't take it personally. After all, not everyone is going to be kind and supportive to help you achieve your dreams. Stick to your guns and you will succeed!

ROF: Favorite art-related blogs, websites, or museums?

DH: The National Gallery, UK. (www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/): I love looking at the old masters. Every time I visit the National it feels like a religious experience, it's so moving. I always find a new piece to fall in love with.

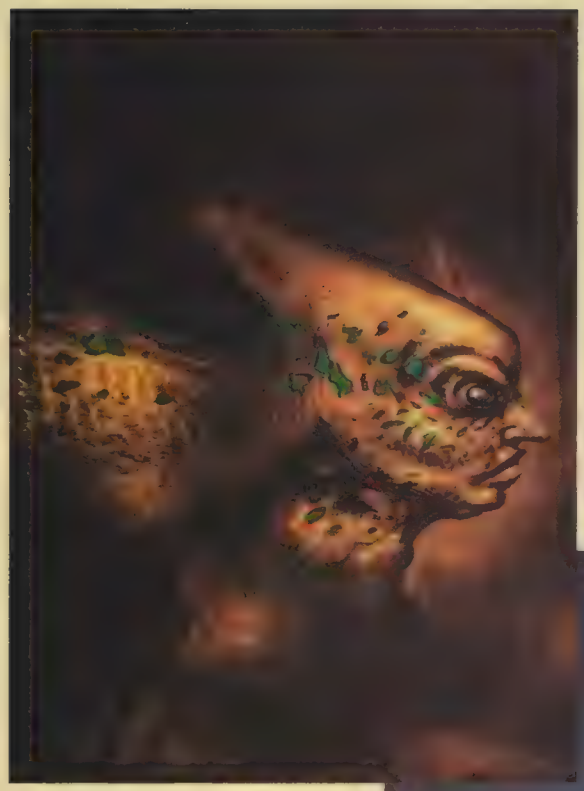
ROF: Do you attend science fiction or fantasy conventions? If so, which ones?

DH: I went to a couple of World Cons some years back and I found them very enjoyable. It's nice to see so many people into the same thing, and it's great to get feedback from your work on a personal, "real" level. Usually I am at home in the studio; and although I do get a good idea through the net on how my work is being received by the public, it's nice to attend a con and show my face. I used to attend many when I first started out, but not as many now. Time is mainly the biggest factor as I'm continually working deadlines, but I do try to get to a few. Horror Con in Brighton, England, earlier this year was fun: my work was very well received and I did well from my print range. I hope to attend Dragon Con next year.

ROF: Do you have a website?

DH: Yes: www.bleedingdreams.com.

DOMINIC HARMAN



HUMATETRAS

BLOOD OF AMBROSE

See more of Dominic Harman's work online at

www.bleedingdreams.com

"I WAS MEANT TO BECOME AN ILLUSTRATOR."

WOLF AGE

THE AMBER SPYGLASS

THE HELLBOUND HEART

MEN OF THE OTHER WORLD

Folktoots

by Theodora Goss

The Femme Fatale at the Fin-de-Siècle

Several years ago, on a rainy afternoon in Boston, I wandered into the Museum of Fine Arts. There, I saw one of the most beautiful exhibits I have ever seen: a collection of art nouveau jewelry. As I walked among the gilded lilies and trembling dragonflies, astonished at the precision and delicacy of the brooches and hair ornaments, I came upon a sculpture. It was the only sculpture in the exhibit, and it was not delicate or gilded or trembling, although it did demonstrate considerable artistic skill—surprisingly, since it was sculpted not by an artist but by the actress Sarah Bernhardt. It was a sculpture of her own head, looking properly Victorian, with a lace collar and upswept hair. But below, the body was that of a beast, with the haunches and claws of a predator, and on her back were a bat's wings. It was not simply a work of art but a functional object, an inkwell that had sat on her own desk.

Sarah Bernhardt

How strange, I thought, to find the image of a woman, beautifully made but also grotesque, among these ornaments designed for the wrists and shoulders of women who had the artistic taste and, even more importantly, the wealth to purchase them from masters such as René Lalique. I knew a little about Sarah Bernhardt. She was the most prominent actress of her day, the daughter of a Jewish courtesan who rose to become a member of the Comédie-Française, and then one of the first important silent film stars. Her talent, particularly in tragic roles, earned her the nickname "The Divine Sarah." At the height of her fame, she was probably the most photographed woman in the world, and she was painted by famous artists such as Alphonse Mucha, who created a number of posters advertising her stage performances. She was one of the women who could have afforded Lalique's jewelry. Yet she had chosen to depict herself as a monster. Why?

This question was particularly important to me because I have long been fascinated by female monsters of various sorts, from Grendel's mother to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Geraldine, from the sirens of Greek mythology to the alien in Ridley Scott's *Alien* film series. I thought of Bernhardt's inkwell as belonging to a particular subset of the female monster, a subspecies, as it were: the femme fatale. If we consulted a dictionary, it would tell us that a femme fatale is simply a deadly woman. However, the term has taken on a more specific connotation. The femme fatale is a woman who is fantastical and seductive: it is these qualities that make her deadly. In Darwinian terms, she has evolved from the line of sirens rather than Grendel's mother. Whereas Grendel's mother kills men, the sirens entice men to kill themselves. And the great era of the femme fatale, the time period during which she was most popular and important, was the *fin-de-siècle* (approximately 1870–1910).

The history of female monsters is as old as the history of women, meaning as old as history itself. It goes back to Ereshkigal and Lilith and Medusa. Here, I will focus on one brief moment in that history, the moment that created our modern world. During the *fin-de-siècle*, man was reduced to a thinking ape, automobiles replaced horses on the streets of London, and the dream of Icarus became a reality. However, despite the birth of our scientific and technological modernity, women were depicted as fantastical creatures, sphinxes and vampires, in literature and art. These depictions can give us a hint as to what Bernhardt may have been thinking when she gave herself claws and wings.

I. A Brief History of the Femme Fatale

In *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon*, Virginia Allen identifies the femme fatale as one half of the dichotomous Eternal Feminine, a term she ascribes to the German writer Johann

Wolfgang von Goethe. In mythological female pairs such as Eve/Lilith and Athena/Medusa, the femmes fatales are Lilith and Medusa. In Jewish mythology, Lilith was supposed to have been the first wife of Adam, created from the same earth: when she refused to obey her husband, she was cast out of Eden, condemned to become a demoness who seduced men and devoured children. Like Ereshkigal, the Sumerian goddess of the underworld, Lilith has wings—she is a precursor for Bernhardt's bat-winged sculpture. Like Medusa, Lilith was also associated with the serpent; a sculpture on the façade of the Notre Dame depicts Lilith, with a serpent's tail, tempting Eve to eat the forbidden fruit.

Lilith Tempting Eve
on the Facade of Notre Dame

According to Ovid, Medusa was originally a beautiful maiden who was raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple. As punishment, Athena transformed her hair into serpents and gave her a countenance that could turn men to stone. But earlier Greek mythology identifies Medusa and her sisters, the Gorgons, as children of the sea deities Phorcys and Ceto—perhaps that original association with the sea is reflected in the later story of the rape by Poseidon. Like Lilith, the Gorgons are also winged. It is interesting to note that both Lilith and Athena are associated with the owl; aspects of the Eternal Feminine are always both opposites and counterparts of each other, fragments of the original Great Goddess that splintered into monsters and deities.

Based on these figures, we can identify several attributes of the femme fatale: she is beautiful, sexual, supernatural, and deadly. (In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Medusa's sexuality is forced upon her. A modern reader would pity the maiden and condemn her punishment as unjust. However, in *Metamorphoses*, Athena's actions are not questioned; Medusa is associated with, and made monstrous for, transgressive sexuality.) The femme fatale's beauty and sexuality differentiate her from female monsters such as Grendel's mother, the Alien, and even the monstrous bride that Victor Frankenstein never creates because he is frightened both by her hideousness and her potential to, like the Alien, create monstrous offspring. Such monsters are frightening because they take on the stereotypical attributes of men. They are large, strong, and brutally violent.

In contrast, the femme fatale is a monstrous version of stereotypical femininity. She is deadly precisely because she is beautiful and seductive. Those attributes allow her to draw close to her victims, and to draw them close to her. When she strikes, she does not kill—instead, she drains something from her victims, blood or some other vital force. In this, she resembles the succubus, a demoness who seduces and drains the semen of human men. (Not surprisingly, Lilith was said to be a succubus.) This loss of vitality eventually causes their deaths. The term femme fatale can also be used for a seductive human woman, such as the dancer Lola Montez, mistress of Franz Liszt and King Ludwig I of Bavaria, or the dancer and spy Mata Hari, whose biography is titled *Femme Fatale*. But such women were femmes fatales in the way that the silent film actress Theda Bara was a vamp—by analogy to the supernatural creatures whose powers of seduction they were supposed to share. The femme fatale is fundamentally a supernatural creature whose seductiveness is more than human.

Although the femme fatale has always existed, she became significantly more popular in both literature and art during the Romantic era. We see her in Coleridge's Geraldine, whom Christabel finds wandering in the forest, a "damsel bright,"

> Drest in a silken robe of white,
> That shadowy in the moonlight shone:
> The neck that made that white robe wan,
> Her stately neck, and arms were bare;
> Her blue-veined feet unsandal'd were;
> And wildly glittered here and there
> The gems entangled in her hair.

We are told that "'twas frightful there to see / A lady so richly clad as she—/ Beautiful exceedingly!"[1] We could call this depiction "Portrait of a Femme Fatale." Geraldine is beautiful and seemingly innocent. She tells Christabel that she is the daughter of a noble

1 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Christabel," *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Russell Noyes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 402.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci by Frank Dicksee

"La belle dame sans merci hath thee in thrall!"

father, captured by knights and brought to this forsaken place. But her initial description already contains the word "frightful," and Geraldine is indeed going to frighten Christabel. Like the Lady of the Green Kirtle in C. S. Lewis's *The Silver Chair*, who is a version of the femme fatale for children, she can turn into a serpent. Both are, at least figuratively, descendants of Lilith and Medusa.

The Lady of the Green Kirtle captures Prince Rilian and keeps him in the underworld, as though she were a Narnian Ereshkigal. Another important Romantic femme fatale also captures and imprisons men. John Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," literally the beautiful woman without mercy, is described as "full beautiful, a faery's child," with long hair, light foot, and wild eyes. The knight who believes she loves him falls asleep and dreams of "pale Kings, and Princes too," who tell him, "La belle dame sans merci / Hath thee in thrall!" Their thrall is a sort of living death; the knight describes them as "death pale," and he himself, waking from his dream, is left to wander through a winter landscape, "Alone and palely loitering."[2] Similarly, Geraldine enthralls

2 John Keats, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Russell Noyes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 1190.

Christabel's father, Sir Leoline, who rejects his own daughter when she pleads with him to send Geraldine away.

I have used the word "enthrall" deliberately because it has a double meaning: both to imprison and to give pleasure to, as a spectacle may enthrall an audience. The femme fatale enthralls in both senses of the word. We see this double sense of the word in one of Edgar Allan Poe's most interesting female characters, Ligeia.[3] Like Geraldine, Ligeia is beautiful, but her beauty is strange; indeed, Poe tells us that true beauty needs "some *strangeness* in the proportion."[4] This strangeness is a characteristic that all femmes fatales seem to share: they are beautiful but also disturbing—or even frightening, like Geraldine in the forest. Ligeia's beauty and her great learning enthrall her husband; after she dies, he turns to opium to ease his pain and constructs the fantastical room in which she can return to him by stealing the body of his second wife, Rowena. When she does return and the cerements of Rowena drop from her body, her husband shrieks that he recognizes the dark eyes of his "lost love," the Lady Ligeia. Is he welcoming her back, or shrieking in fear? For the lover of the femme fatale, the answer is—probably both.

Yet the femme fatale herself can love, as we see in another important character from the middle of the nineteenth century, Beatrice Rappaccini. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter," we meet the femme fatale as a creation of the mad scientist, a theme that will be echoed in James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein*, in which the mad scientist does create a bride for his monster. Beatrice demonstrates the paradoxical nature of the femme fatale: although she is deadly, she is not necessarily evil. Beatrice infuses her lover with the poison that is an intrinsic part of her own physiology, turning him into a monster like herself, but she does so unintentionally. She cannot help being what she is. The femme fatale is capable of loving her victim: even the Belle Dame sans Merci looks at the knight "as she did love."[5] However, that love is almost inevitably destructive. The femme fatale does not destroy her victims through violence, as Grendel's mother might. Instead, like the victims of the vampire, they come to her willingly, and more often than not, they enjoy dying at her hands—or joining her in monstrosity.

As this brief history indicates, the femme fatale has an ancient lineage. She has been with us since at least the days of Sumer, seducing us, enthralling us, destroying us—and although we have found her frightening, we have also fallen under her spell. However, it was during the *fin-de-siècle*, in the literary and artistic movements of the turn of the century, that the femme fatale reached her fullest expression.

II. The Femme Fatale and the New Woman

During the *fin-de-siècle*, the femme fatale proliferated. Ancient and Romantic versions of the femme fatale became important artistic and literary images. Dante Gabriel Rossetti painted *Lady Lilith* and wrote a poem, inscribed on the frame, in which he identified her as a beautiful and seductive femme fatale:

> Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told
> (The witch he loved before the gift of Eve,)
> That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,
> And her enchanted hair was the first gold.

Rossetti's Lilith "Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave, / Till heart and body and life are in its hold"; like La Belle Dame sans Merci, she enthralls and imprisons men. La Belle Dame sans Merci herself was depicted almost obsessively by painters of the time, appearing in paintings by Frank Cadogan Cowper, John William Waterhouse, and Frank Dicksee.

However, writers and artists also introduced new forms of the femme fatale, perhaps most importantly the vampire. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Jonathan Harker wanders around Count Dracula's castle and falls under the spell of his hungry vampire brides. He identifies them as "ladies by their dress and manner," but the "kisses" they offer are actually bites that will drain his blood. Nevertheless, he lies back, waiting to be bitten "in an agony of delightful anticipation."[6] Harker's reference to the vampire brides as "ladies" is significant because later in the novel a lady becomes a monster: Dracula's bite transforms the innocent Lucy Westenra into a vampire. Once Lucy rises in her vampire form, she takes on the femme fatale's traditional attributes. She is even more beautiful than she was in life, but we are told that her sweetness has turned "to voluptuous wantonness." She calls her lover, Arthur Holmwood, to join her, telling him that her arms are hungry for him,

3 Ibid., 58

4 Edgar Allan Poe, "Ligeia," *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*, ed. David Galloway (New York: Penguin, 2003), 63.

5 John Keats, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Russell Noyes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 1190.

6 Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. Maurice Hindle (New York: Penguin, 1993), 53.

The Vampire by Edvard Munch

and her "lawn death-robe" is described as stained with the blood of children from whom she has been feeding. Like a modern Lilith, Lucy seduces men and devours children. When she is angered, her brows wrinkle "as though the folds of flesh were the coils of Medusa's snakes."[7]

The image of the vampire was so powerful at the *fin-de-siècle* that it even appeared where it was not originally intended. Edvard Munch's painting *Love and Pain* was retitled *The Vampire* after a fellow writer identified it as containing vampiric themes. The depiction of a woman consoling a man was transformed into a femme fatale feeding. But why was the image of the vampire so powerful, and how can we account for the proliferation of femmes fatales? They appear in works of art as different as Munch's painting, *The Siren* by Waterhouse, *Des Caresses* by Fernand Khnopff, and even a brooch shaped like a dragonfly designed by René Lalique. In *The Siren* and *Des Caresses*, we see the traditional function of the femme fatale: to lead men to their destruction. Waterhouse's siren sits on a rock, playing her lyre and gazing down at the sailor who, enthralled by her music, does not seem to care whether or not he drowns. Khnopff's femme fatale, a sphinx with the head of a woman and the body of a leopard, nestles up to the soldier standing beside her, as though rubbing her cheek against his. Like the sailor, he seems perfectly content to stay by her side.

Des Caresses by Fernand Khnopff

Lalique's dragonfly brooch appears to be a representation of the femme fatale herself, a beautiful female figure with delicate wings but monstrous claws. She seems as dangerous, in her diminutive way, as the siren or leopard woman.

In *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*, Bram Dijkstra argues that such images were misogynistic representations of a *fin-de-siècle* fear: that women would rise up and take social, political, and economic power. The New Woman movement posed a challenge to the prevailing separate spheres ideology of the Victorian era, the idea that men belonged in the public sphere and women's proper place was in the private sphere of the home. New Women wanted to cut their hair, ride bicycles, and go to college. They wanted to work and vote, perhaps even—most scandalously—find love outside of marriage. According to Dijkstra, representations such as *Des Caresses* and *The Siren* revealed men's fear that women were taking power, threatening their own prerogatives as the vampire brides threaten Jonathan Harker. Indeed, when Rudyard Kipling warned that "the female of the species is more deadly than the male," he meant in the political arena as well.[8] Her deadliness was a justification for keeping her in the private sphere—ironically, since earlier in the century it had been her innocence, her unsuitability for the rough and tumble of public life, that had justified the same position.

In *Dracula*, Lucy represents the fear that ladies are turning into monsters. They are taking on the attributes that the New Woman shares with the femme fatale, rejecting traditional female roles, destroying marriage and motherhood. But paintings such as *Des Caresses* and *The Siren* cannot entirely be explained by Dijkstra's argument. They are too beautiful, the femmes fatales in them depicted too lovingly. The male figures in the paintings do not seem threatened by the deadly women they are encountering. In *The Siren*, the sailor reaches up toward the siren singing to him, and in *Des Caresses*, the soldier leans into his leopard bride. They indicate our

7 Ibid., 271-2.

8 Rudyard Kipling, "The Female of the Species," *The Collected Poems of Rudyard Kipling* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994), 379.

own complicated response to the femme fatale. She frightens us, but she also fascinates us. And what can we say of Lalique's dragonfly brooch? I saw that brooch in the exhibit of art nouveau jewelry that also included Bernhardt's inkwell. It was small, no larger than the palm of my hand, and it was clearly meant to adorn an evening dress. If the dragonfly woman was meant to be a representation of monstrous femininity, what message would wearing such an ornament convey? What would it say about the woman who displayed it, most likely a wealthy socialite? It might suggest the fundamentally double nature of womanhood itself at the *fin-de-siècle*. Perhaps the femme fatale was so popular in literature and art because she embodied that doubleness: she was both desirable and dangerous, both what we longed for and what we were afraid we might submit to—or become. Wearing Lalique's dragonfly brooch would have been a powerful if ambiguous message. Would you have chosen to wear it? I would, if I could have afforded such an ornament.

III. Women Appropriating the Femme Fatale

We can at least begin to answer the question I asked that day in the museum—why Sarah Bernhardt would represent herself as a monster—by considering the ambiguity of the femme fatale. Although Dijkstra argues that the femme fatale was a misogynistic representation of the New Woman by *fin-de-siècle* artists and writers, he also indicates that at least some women may have found the image of the femme fatale empowering. After all, paintings such as *Des Caresses* and *The Siren* depicted female figures as powerful, in a position of control—some women may have considered it "better to be feared as a predator than to be disdained as a fool."[9] We do see women writers of the *fin-de-siècle* appropriating the femme fatale for their own purposes: Vernon Lee's "Dionea" and Mary Coleridge's "The White Women" present us with two versions of the femme fatale that differ in interesting ways from the tradition, and that would be difficult to label misogynistic.

"Dionea" begins with a child washed up on the beach of an Italian town, supposedly from a shipwreck. That child, named Dionea, grows up in the town's convent, but scandalizes the nuns by her unconventional ways, summoning pigeons and attempting to put on the gown and veil reserved for the Madonna. After she leaves the convent, Dionea becomes the town's witch, living in a hovel by the seashore and making a living by selling love potions. She is so beautiful that at least one man kills himself for love of her, although she herself seems to inspire, but not return, love. When the sculptor Waldemar and his family move into town, he asks Dionea to model for a statue of Venus, incorporating an altar that is said to have stood in Venus's temple. One morning, the town is shocked by terrible news: Waldemar lies dead at the foot of a cliff, and his wife has been sacrificed on Venus's altar. Presumably, she was his offering—to Dionea. Such seduction and death seem typical for the femme fatale, but clues scattered throughout the story make clear that Dionea is something more—an incarnation of the goddess Venus reborn in modern times, when goddesses are no longer recognized. What can Dionea do, being what she is? She must cause destruction by her very nature.

Coleridge's White Women are also destructive: men who look upon them die, as though they had seen Medusa. Both Coleridge and Lee incorporate references to Medusa, connecting their characters back to the ancient lineage of the femme fatale; although Dionea is not deadly to look upon, she is described as having a serpentine smile. Coleridge's White Women also have the femme fatale's beauty and power:

Taller are they than man, and very fair,
Their cheeks are pale,
At sight of them the tiger in his lair,
The falcon hanging in the azure air,
The eagles quail.

Coleridge tells us that "The deadly shafts their nervous hands let fly / Are stronger than our strongest—."[10] Her description of the White Women seems to have been influenced by the legend of the Amazons, whose arrows were also deadly. These Amazonian White Women must have presented

The Siren
by John William Waterhouse

9 Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 265.

10 Mary Coleridge, "The White Women," *Voices from Fairyland: The Fantastical Poems of Mary Coleridge, Charlotte Mew, and Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Theodora Goss (Seattle: Aqueduct Press, 2008), 18.

a liberating image for women of the *fin-de-siècle*. At a time when proper ladies still needed chaperones to walk about town, being a wild white woman before whom tigers quail must have seemed like an attractive alternative.

Sarah Bernhardt did not need a chaperone. At a time when ordinary women's lives were restricted, hers was extraordinary and unrestricted. Publicly, she was The Divine Sarah—a celebrity, as close as we get to a goddess in the modern world. But on her desk, in the privacy of her study, stood a representation of her with the body of a beast and a bat's wings. We cannot know for certain why Bernhardt sculpted herself in this way. But I like to think that she did so to acknowledge her own ambiguous, fantastical qualities, to claim the history of the femme fatale for her own. After all, the femme fatale could be interpreted as an image of female power, as a siren or Dionea. Bernhardt was one of the most powerful women of the *fin-de-siècle*, an actress with the ability to enthrall an audience. It is no wonder that she identified with the beautiful, dangerous, but always fascinating femme fatale.

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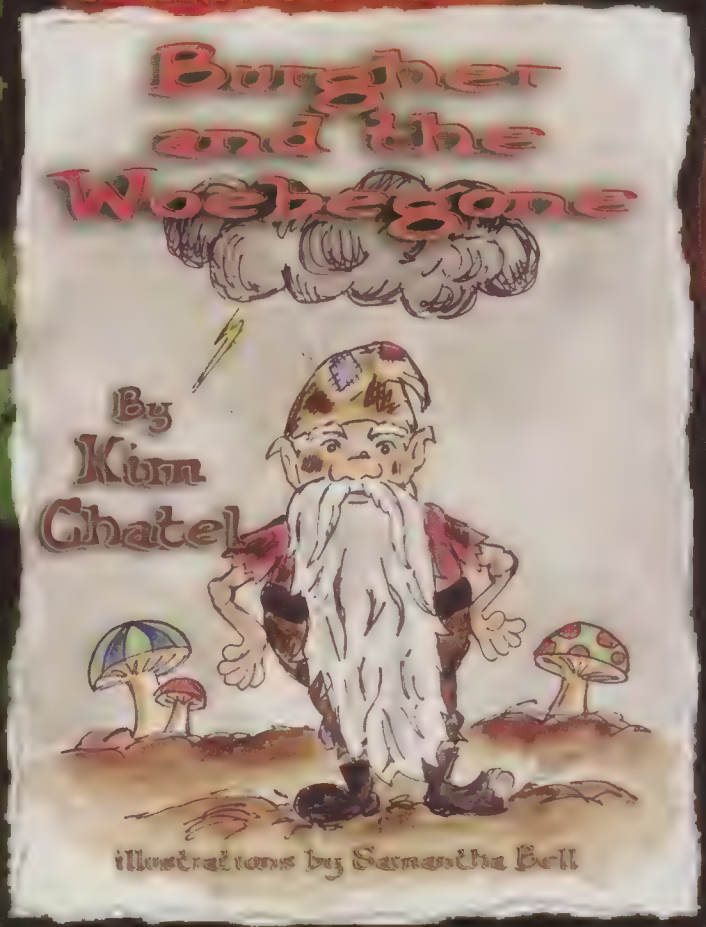

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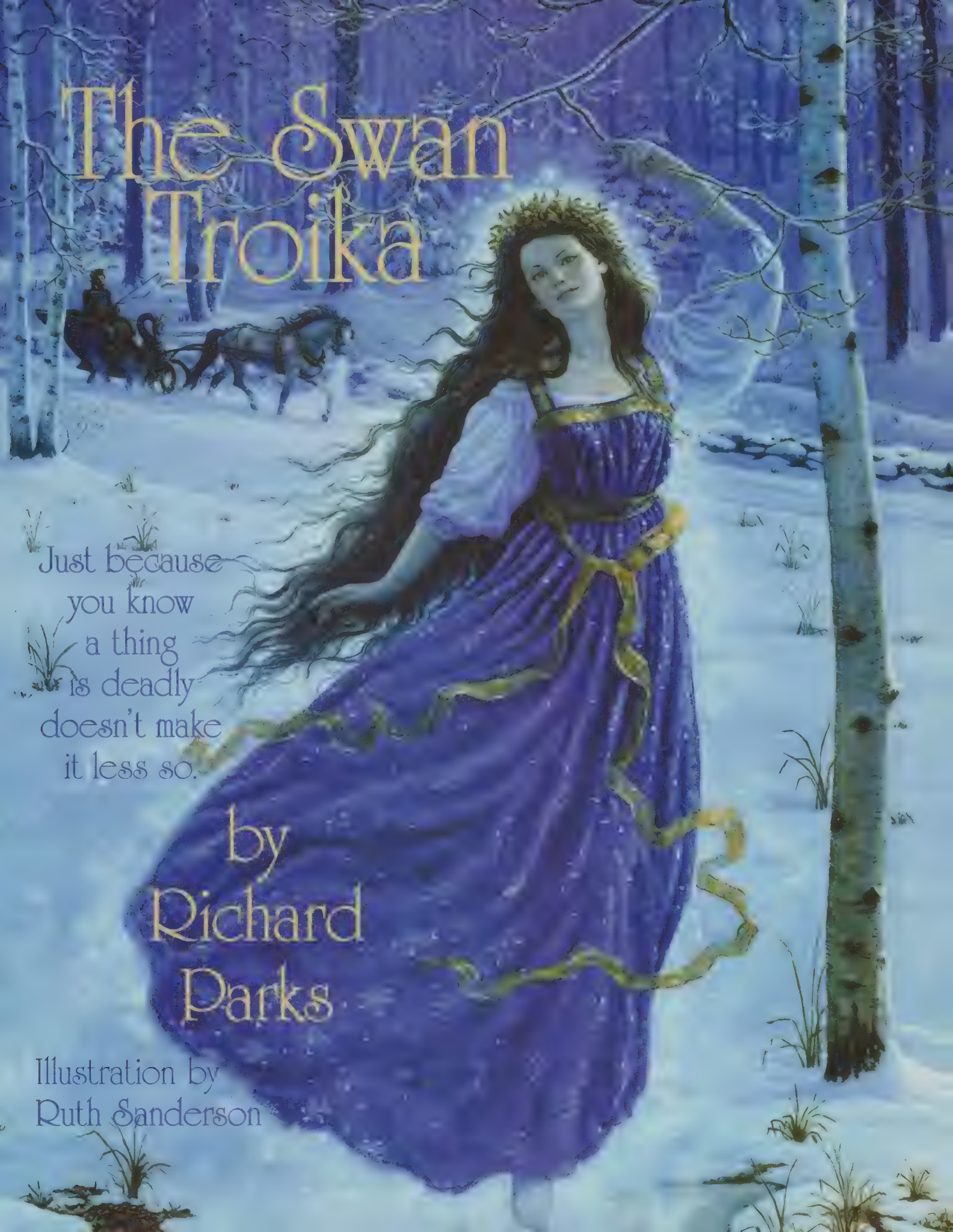
The Swan Troika
Just because you know a thing is deadly doesn't make it less so.
by Richard Parks
Illustration by Ruth Sanderson

The girl standing alone beside the river was a *rusalka*. There wasn't the slightest doubt in Pyotr's mind. Who else had such long, wild hair or such eyes, the color of emeralds? The sensible thing would have been to turn his fanciful *troika* away from the river path and seek another route to Great-Aunt Svetlana's ball, and Pyotr was as sensible as a man barely past twenty could reasonably be. Yet two things prevented him from doing the sensible thing. The first was that he had never seen a girl so beautiful.

The second reason was, to Pyotr's way of thinking, even more important: it was the middle of December, and the river was one solid and very thick sheet of ice.

Pyotr required a firm hand on the reins to make his horse stop anywhere near the girl; obviously the horse knew what was what, and had neither the girl's beauty nor Pyotr's understanding about the limitations of *rusalka* and rivers to cloud its opinion of the matter. Yet stop they did.

The moon was a cold crescent; its light did nothing to dim the stars as they cast rainbows of color in the night sky like sunlight through shards of ice. The horse's breath was a cloud of smoke; for a moment Pyotr could almost fancy that some dragon of legend was pulling his carved sleigh. He wondered if the girl thought so too because she looked as if she wanted to climb up into a naked willow that stood between her and the river, but the willow's branches were coated with ice and even a *rusalka* couldn't find a grip there.

"You're either very brave or very foolish."

Pyotr wondered what he would say to her, but he didn't have the luxury of time to think of something clever. For all he knew the girl was on the verge of fleeing, and he wasn't sure what he might do then.

"Don't be afraid; I won't hurt you," he said finally, even though he knew it was a silly thing to say to such a creature. "My name is Pyotr. What are you doing out by yourself on a night like this?"

"I was careless," she said. "I've gotten lost." Her expression was simple and her voice was sweet. Her voice was also as cold as the depths of the Baltic.

"Say rather that you tarried on the shore too long," Pyotr said. "And now the door to your home is shut until spring. What will you do until then?"

She turned away. Perhaps she was looking at the ice on the river. Perhaps she was simply not looking at him. "I don't know what you mean," she said.

"Yes, you do," Pyotr said. "Come, now. The night is cold and I am late to my great-aunt's party. I can't leave you shivering here on the riverbank."

"I do not shiver," she said finally. "I do not feel the cold."

"I can feel it for both of us, and that is quite enough."

"I am not dressed for a party."

The *rusalka* had a point, Pyotr had to admit. Her clothes, while obviously of fine make and certainly better than he would have expected under the circumstances, were not suitable for a proper ball. Fortunately or otherwise, "a proper ball" had nothing to do with Great-Aunt Svetlana's parties.

"The party is a masquerade, see?" Pyotr held up his own mask, which was the face of a cat. "We'll find you something appropriate. I've told you my name. May I ask yours?"

"I don't know my name," she said. "I suppose I must have had one, but I don't remember."

He pondered. "I've always liked 'Anya.' May I call you that?"

She looked at him again. "If you wish, but I don't understand you. If you know what I am, then why are you doing this? You know what I will do to you."

"I know what you will try to do, but not before spring, yes? And until then, what is to become of you? The ice is too thick even for a *rusalka* to break, or you would have done it already. So it is my whim to offer you a choice: You can come with me to a ball and remember what it was to be mortal for a while. Or you can wander this frozen river all winter."

"You're either very brave or very foolish," Anya said.

Anya's small feet barely made a mark in the snow as she approached the sleigh. Fortunately, as she came closer, she moved behind the horse's blinders so that it could no longer see her, and that seemed to calm the nervous beast. Being a proper *troika* despite its fancy carving, Pyotr's sleigh was designed to harness up to three horses abreast, but now he was grateful that he had never needed more than one and so had only that one beast to deal with now.

For all his talk, Pyotr was the nervous one.

While it might have been true that Anya could not snatch him out of his sleigh and drown him in the river as was proper for her kind, she remained a *rusalka*, the vengeful spirit of a drowned girl, and that was little different from death, no matter how pleasing its form. Anya had asked him why he was doing this, and the truth was that he did not know. Despite all that he understood about what a *rusalka* was, there was something about Anya that seemed familiar, that made him hesitate there by the frozen river.

Pyotr told himself that this notion was ridiculous; he knew of no young girls who had drowned themselves or been drowned, and certainly none in his own family. More likely he had simply allowed himself to become bewitched by Anya's charms; he was young and hot-blooded and her supple form called to him. He simply could not be sure, and only certainty would have allowed him to take any other course than to stand up in the sleigh as she approached, as he would for any lady.

Anya wasn't looking at him. Her slim fingers reached out and rested against the carved feathers of the *troika*. She seemed to be entranced by it, which surprised Pyotr a bit. He hadn't expected such a human reaction from a *rusalka*. Granted, the sleigh was a lovely thing; the carving was fanciful and very fine work, meticulously painted and gilded. To anyone watching Pyotr drive by, it would seem that he glided along on the back of a giant black swan.

"Do you like it? I admit it's not really suitable for a bachelor," Pyotr said. "Yet it was a gift from my great-aunt, who is more formally known as Countess Svetlana Ivanovna Orlovskaya, and thus not to be refused. You can see that two will fit quite cozily here, and that's no doubt what the dear lady had in mind when she gave it to me. She's a schemer, that one."

Anya said nothing. She finally stepped into the sleigh, and sat down beside Pyotr on the fur-covered bench. As he expected, Anya was cold to the touch; Pyotr wrapped a blanket around them both and flicked the reins. Soon they were gliding across the snow as if the swan had indeed taken flight as they left the river behind.

Anya shivered.

Pyotr glanced at her and frowned. "I thought you didn't do that."

"So did I," Anya said. "I don't understand."

"Are you cold?" he asked. Pyotr adjusted the blanket, but when his fingers accidentally brushed Anya's shoulder she did not feel cold. Nor warm, exactly, but certainly not the block of ice she'd seemed when she first stepped into the sleigh.

She shook her head. "No. It's nothing," she said, but she shivered again. Pyotr looked down and met her gaze.

"I've seen that look before, Anya. You're afraid. That's why you're shivering. What has a *rusalka* to fear?"

"Perhaps it's because we've moved so far from the river."

A few minutes before, they had crossed the bridge leading away from the city and toward his great-aunt's estate; the river was long since lost in a bend in the road as the darkness of the forest closed in behind them. "That must be it," Pyotr said. "Don't worry. Come spring, the river will still be there."

Great-Aunt Svetlana's country mansion was her primary residence. She kept a house in the city for convenience, but only used it when business or social obligation compelled her presence, which was not often. Usually, people came to *her*, and that was the way Countess Orlovskaya preferred it. Pyotr turned his sleigh through the gates of her palatial estate to find a light in almost every window and the path to the front door rutted with the tracks of sleighs that had come before them. Pyotr took Anya's hand and led her to the door as his great-aunt's shivering groomsmen saw to his horse and sleigh.

The warmth from within enveloped them as they entered the grand house. A uniformed attendant of advanced years took Pyotr's overcoat and gloves, though of course Anya had neither. On Pyotr's advice, she kept her gaze lowered so that no one would see her eyes.

Pyotr spoke to the servant. "I remember you. You're...Alexi, correct? My great-aunt is in the ballroom, I presume?" Pyotr asked.

"Yes to both, sir."

"Ah. Then all's as it should be. The lady—" Pyotr indicated Anya, "—has forgotten her mask. I do not think the mistress of the house will object if we borrow one of hers."

"As you wish."

Alexi led them to a table in an alcove where several ball masks were arranged on a table, and then withdrew. Some of the masks were little more than eye-masks attached to painted sticks; others were more elaborate. Anya just stared at them, so Pyotr chose a half-mask shaped like a golden sunburst. He helped her to put it on, then carefully tied the strings.

"This way you won't have to remember to hold it up," he said. "And the eye-slits will make your lovely green eyes less noticeable. Now, let me look at you."

Pyotr stepped back to arm's length as Anya looked up at him. Nothing could totally disguise the strangeness of Anya's intensely green eyes, but as he had hoped, the effect was somewhat muted. "You're a vision," he said, gallantly offering her his arm. "Shall we?"

He led Anya to the ballroom. Despite being lit by only candles and oil lamps, the huge room seemed bright and cheerful. The Countess Orlovskaya's ball was well under way, and Pyotr did not miss the way Anya's gaze darted here and there, like minnows trying to catch sunbeams on the surface of a stream. There was music and laughter and dancing people dressed in beautiful clothes and bright colors. Pyotr and Anya stood for a few moments along the near wall, watching the spectacle.

"It is not such a bad thing to be human," Pyotr said after a while. "You can understand why a man might regret your embrace, even if he could not resist it."

She looked at him, a masked image of the sun. "What is your regret, Pyotr? Think of it now because, when the time comes," she leaned close and whispered the last bit, "I will kill you

if I can."

"Will you enjoy it?" he asked.

She frowned. "I will do it," she said. "That is all that should matter to you."

He smiled grimly. "*I* decide what matters to me, Anya. That's what mortals do. Now answer my question: If it is my fate that you drown me, will you enjoy it?"

She didn't answer right away. She watched the people dancing. "No," she said finally. "Nor will it make me sad or happy. I feel nothing save hunger. I have killed before I met you, I will kill after tonight. And I will still be hungry."

"That is very unfortunate then, for the both of us," Pyotr said. "Come, let's greet my Great-Aunt Svetlana. She doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Pyotr took Anya's hand again, and after a moment he took the other hand and held both. "Your hands...they're almost warm," he said.

She frowned. "I don't understand."

"Have you ever been around so many people before?" he asked, and Anya shook her head.

"How could I? Perhaps that's the reason."

"Well, I don't suppose it means anything," he said, then added, "yet it's curious. Come."

He led her to the end of the ballroom where Countess Orlovskaya held court in a grand gilded chair surrounded by attendants and aristocracy alike. Pyotr cheerfully detested most of them, but he smiled at the countess even before she noticed him. After a moment she nodded curtly to the middle-aged man bowing to her and he left to rejoin the throng watching the dancing.

Countess Orlovskaya showed every one of her seventy-three years, but it was easy to see what a beauty she had once been. Her face may have been wrinkled, but her eyes were clear and bright, and her whole expression, formerly dour, lightened when she saw Pyotr approaching. He bowed at the waist, and Anya, to his considerable surprise, managed a quite-passable curtsey. The countess smiled at them both.

"Well now, my darling boy, what have you brought your old aunt?"

Pyotr led Anya forward. "This is Anya. She is...a friend."

Countess Orlovskaya smiled wider. "About time, too. Come closer, child, and take off your mask. Let me have a better look at you."

Anya obeyed, though she kept her gaze down. Countess Orlovskaya took the girl's chin in her hand and raised it to get a better look at her face, and Anya closed her eyes. Countess Orlovskaya's smile never wavered, but after a moment she settled back in her chair. "Well, now," she said. "What have you brought me, indeed." She waved Pyotr forward and Anya, repeating the curtsey, stepped back. Pyotr kneeled beside the old woman's chair as he had done so many times before.

"I hope Anya's appearance hasn't startled you. She's an unusual girl, I freely admit—"

His great-aunt interrupted him with a swat of her fan. "We will speak of her later, perhaps. For now, I'm going to lecture you a bit, as is an old woman's prerogative. As my sole heir, you're coming into a time in your life when you're going to make important decisions for your future, and the future of our family."

"You need not worry about that. You've taught me well," Pyotr said.

There was a distant look on his great-aunt's face, even as she spoke to him directly. "That may be, but sometimes even when you do the right thing...or what you believe is right, it can still come back to haunt you, and all the good intentions and consideration on earth won't prevent that. I want you to understand this, Pyotr. It's important."

Pyotr frowned. "You're telling me life isn't fair?"

The old woman sighed. "You learned *that* lesson the day your parents died. No, Pyotr. I'm telling you that sometimes life is absolutely fair, and that's far worse." She nodded at Anya, who by now had put her mask back on and was standing a discreet distance away. "But enough of an old woman's ramblings on such a fine night. You're neglecting a young lady, and that's never wise. Go ask her to dance."

"I don't think she knows how," Pyotr said.

The old woman's face was unreadable. "Then teach her. I would consider it a personal favor."

His great-aunt's "favor" sounded more like a command, and Pyotr obeyed. In her turn, Anya passively followed Pyotr as he led her out to the floor. Her first steps were uncertain, but she quickly matched herself to his lead.

"You learn quickly," he said.

"I am *rusalka*, and I am thus a good mimic of humans. What do you see when you look at me?"

"I see a beautiful young woman who wants to kill me. With respect, Anya, it's not the first time."

She laughed then, and as quickly her expression turned serious again. "And since you think that was clever, I knew I should laugh when you said that, the better to charm you. I don't know what it feels like to want to laugh, or to truly understand what laughter means, but I can do it, just as I can dance with you now. I am not what you see."

"I do know a bit about what a *rusalka* is, Anya. Why are you telling me this?"

"Your great-aunt knows. She knows what I am," she said.

Pyotr frowned. "How?"

"I don't know how. She never saw my eyes," Anya said, "but she knows."

Pyotr thought of his great-aunt again and the way she looked at Anya and then thought of something he had not thought of before. "I have an idea. Come with me."

He led her from the floor. He was aware of the countess's gaze on the both of them as they left the room, but he did not stop to explain. He led Anya up the staircase to the second floor and the large portrait hanging there at the top of the stairs.

"I thought there was something familiar about you, back when I first saw you by the river, but dismissed what I felt. That was wrong of me. Take off your mask, Anya."

She did as he bid. Standing in front of the portrait, the likeness was even clearer. Pyotr wanted to kick himself for not noticing it sooner, but when he had seen Anya so close to his great-aunt, even wearing the mask, he could tell.

The portrait was that of a beautiful young woman of about twenty, with long red hair and green eyes. Not *rusalka* green, but green enough. She was dressed in an elegant gown and her hair was lifted and styled and dressed with combs and pins, but even so the resemblance was astonishing.

"This is Countess Orlovskaya as a young woman, Anya. You could be her sister, and perhaps that is what she recognized. But my aunt had no sisters, just a brother, my grandfather."

"You're making too much of this," Anya said. "Perhaps your great-aunt is simply wiser than you are. Perhaps she saw the resemblance for what it is—a ruse. I told you it was my nature to appear to be what I am not. I am the spirit of a drowned girl, sent back to prey upon the living. That is all. No doubt my instincts gave me this form to appeal to you on a deeper level than you understood. That's why you stopped for me by the river despite your better judgment. That's why you should take me back there. Now."

"Anya...."

"There is no Anya! There is only this *thing* that will take your life and feed on it like a starving wolf at a carcass. Despite your good heart. Despite your kindness and your gallantry and your courage and all the reasons you should live in this world for a long, long time."

Pyotr looked at the portrait. He did not look at the creature he called Anya. "I know. I had no business bringing you here. It was wrong of me, and even now I don't understand why I did it. But it's done and I can't change that."

"I'm not asking you to change anything. I'm asking you to take me back to the river, Pyotr. I'm asking you to understand that, if you try to see me again, if you try to find me in the spring, I will kill you, but first I will call you a fool! Take me back to the river while it is still safely frozen and leave me there." She sighed, and then added, "Please."

Pyotr took a deep breath, let it out. "Yes, of course I'll take you back. But while we remain together I'm going to keep calling you Anya."

She smiled again, though this time Pyotr wondered why. "As you wish."

Pyotr reclaimed his coat and gloves, and they went searching for the *troika*. They found it in Countess Orlovskaya's carriage barn, its harness and Pyotr's horse nowhere to be seen.

"What's this about?" Pyotr asked the groom.

"The countess has informed us that you and your guest will be staying here tonight."

Pyotr frowned. "That's a mistake. We have pressing business back in the city. I need my sleigh ready to travel within the hour."

The groom, a stout man of about fifty years, looked unhappy. "I don't think you understand, young sir. Countess Orlovskaya insists." The groom nodded toward the main gate, and there was more meaning there than a simple nod. Curious, Pyotr went to the open barn door and saw

"I just remember the swan. The beautiful swan."

the two armed guards stationed at the front gate. He would have sworn they were not there when he and Anya had arrived.

"I see. And the other guests?"

"We have received no such instructions concerning them," the groom confirmed.

Pyotr knew of two other exits from the grounds that would accommodate a sleigh, but even if he could locate and reharness his horse by himself, he had no doubt that there were guards at both other exits as well. It was not like his great-aunt to overlook a detail, large or small. He went to tell Anya. He found her standing beside the *troika*, just as he had left her.

"I'm afraid there's nothing for it tonight. I'll sort this out with my great-aunt and take you back tomorrow, I promise."

"I remember this," she said, as if she hadn't heard one word he'd said. Her hands were resting on the feathers of the swan's carved neck again, just as they had by the river.

"I would hope so. It's the sleigh we arrived in not two hours ago."

She shook her head. "When you first stopped for me by the river, I recognized this sleigh. I've seen it before today, and I remember being with someone. But I can't remember who, or when, or where. I just remember the swan. The beautiful swan."

Pyotr took Anya back to the house, but when he tried to speak to his great-aunt, she simply said, "You're both staying tonight and that's my will."

Pyotr wanted to tell his great-aunt why he should be allowed to leave, but he believed Anya when she told him that the old woman already knew her secret. Any thoughts he had of creating a fuss faded when he had heard the tone of his Great-Aunt Svetlana's voice; harsh experience had taught him that it was not wise to argue with his great-aunt when she used that voice. For lack of a better option he danced several more dances with Anya, and when the last of the guests had departed, his great-aunt's servants showed them to their separate rooms. When he attempted one more time to speak to his great-aunt, the servants were polite but firm: The countess has retired for the evening. The countess does not wish to be disturbed under any circumstances. The countess hopes you sleep well.

Apparently, the countess wanted to make very sure that Pyotr's night was not disturbed because, when he tried to slip out of the room later, there was a well-armed man standing outside his door who made him reconsider. Back in his room, Pyotr no more than glanced at the soft bed awaiting him. He stoked the fire in the grate but after that he simply paced.

If my great-aunt knows what Anya is, then she means to protect me from my own stupidity. She means to

destroy Anya.

Even as the thought formed, Pyotr knew it was foolish. Why should he want to protect Anya, and could a *rusalka* be killed in the first place? How did you slay something that was, more or less, already dead? He'd heard stories that *rusalka* had to keep their hair wet, for if it dried out they would surely perish, but Anya's hair had been dry when he found her; she'd suffered no ill-effects from being away from her river. Would knife or pistol affect her? Pyotr did not believe so, but that wasn't to say that his great-aunt might not try.

While Countess Orlovskaya had always been kind to him, one did not survive and flourish in the circles his great-aunt moved in without both making and dealing with enemies. She was, he knew, capable of almost anything. And there was a part of him that simply did not wish for Anya to be harmed, no matter what she was.

The servant Alexi interrupted his morbid reverie, bringing a tray with a snifter of brandy.

"The Countess is rather civilized toward her prisoners, isn't she?" Pyotr asked.

Alexi just sighed. "The countess is civilized in all her affairs, sir. Good night."

Alexi left the tray on a small table and departed. Pyotr sat down on the edge of the bed and swirled the brandy before he took a sip. The brandy was warm and soothing and soon he had finished all of it. His eyelids were starting to feel heavy, but Pyotr ignored his weariness.

There's another way. She doesn't know that I know about the passage.

Pyotr had found a hidden corridor when playing hide-and-seek with the servants' children during a family visit. He thought he'd broken something at first when the panel in the room opened, and thus told no one, but later realized that he'd found one of the mansion's secret passages. Whether Countess Orlovskaya's father had built it for his rumored assignations or she herself had added it later, Pyotr didn't know. He did know there was a secret hallway that connected almost every bedroom on the second floor, save his own great-aunt's chambers. If there was a passage leading to those, he had never found it.

Most likely she had it sealed. But the other doors are still there.

He would have preferred to present himself at Anya's bedroom in a more appropriate fashion, if any nocturnal visit to an unmarried young woman's bedchamber could be considered "appropriate," *rusalka* or no. Even so, the guard at his own door, and likely one at Anya's as well, had scuttled that plan. Pyotr decided to take the means available.

He twisted the rightmost candle sconce above the fireplace and heard a faint click. At the same moment, a large wooden panel on the right of the mantel creaked slowly open.

"The Countess is rather civilized toward her prisoners, isn't she?"

Pyotr took the candle down and lit it with the fire in the grate, then slipped inside the dark passage.

The corridor was narrow, tall, and thick with dust. Pyotr felt almost as if he moved through a passageway of smoke. His eyes didn't want to stay open; at first he thought this was due to the dust, but there was nothing stinging his eyes like dust or smoke might do.

I must be more tired than I thought.

Pyotr did feel weary, more so with every step. Now his legs felt almost as heavy as his eyelids. He blinked to keep his eyes open; he forced his legs to carry him. The corridor seemed to stretch much farther than he remembered, but Pyotr pressed on. Now he was grateful for its narrowness; he almost felt that if the corridor had been any wider or took any unexpected turns, he might get lost. But that was nonsense, he told himself. There was nowhere to get lost; the upper floor of his great-aunt's home was large but not infinite. Yet he had not yet detected any of the faint outlines or the interior latches that would have revealed the entrance to another bedroom. Everything seemed much farther away than it should have been, his progress much too slow.

At last he heard soft voices. Pyotr felt that surely he had reached the room where Anya was being held, but when he cautiously cracked open the panel, he saw instead a young woman with long red hair, wearing a beautiful ball gown, speaking to a tall, handsome man in the uniform of an officer of the royal guard. Pyotr blinked carefully, trying to force his rebellious eyes into better focus, but he did not remember seeing any of them at the ball. He could not hear what they were saying. The man was whispering to the young woman, she was smiling even though there were tears in her eyes. Pyotr just stared.

She looks like Great-Aunt Svetlana as a young girl.

Not "like" he realized, even though he knew what he was thinking was insane. This young woman *was* his great-aunt. The hair and dress were different from the portrait, but it was her. He was sure.

The man and woman embraced and kissed, alone in that dimly lit room. Pyotr realized he was spying on a tryst and immediately closed the panel as carefully and quietly as he could.

That couldn't have been Great-Aunt Svetlana. That woman is young. Svetlana is old.

Pyotr shook his head. It wasn't possible. Perhaps it was someone who resembled his aunt. Anya did, though he could easily tell them apart. This woman could have been his great-aunt's twin, if his great-aunt's twin had been born fifty years or so after

her sister. It made no sense, so Pyotr stopped trying to make sense of it. He told himself what he had seen did not matter. The woman was not Anya. Doubtless the woman was another guest at the ball, as was her lover, even though Pyotr did not recognize him. He decided to peep once more, just to get a look at the man's face. That way he would recognize him the next time he saw him, and discover the lady's true identity. He carefully opened the panel.

The room was dark. No candles were lit. The room was cold and empty and did not appear as if it had been used in years. Pyotr rubbed his eyes and looked again, but the room remained empty.

My eyes are open. How could I be dreaming?

Pyotr closed the panel and resumed his trek down the corridor. He felt a sense of urgency now, even though he could barely put one foot in front of the other and his hand holding the candle was beginning to shake. The events of the day were catching up with him; he was bone tired, and perhaps the brandy had been a mistake. Of course he had not seen his great-aunt as a young woman. He was hallucinating; the alcohol must have affected him more than he realized.

He opened another panel, but this one did not lead to a room. Sunlight blinded him for a moment. He heard laughter. He stood near a riverbank in spring. Young men and women were dancing country dances, hands joined in circles in a bright grassy meadow, and were then pairing off one after another to go down to the trees by the river.

"They are in love," Pyotr heard himself say when the last of the dancers had vanished.

"They are dead," someone else said.

Anya stood alone where the dancers had been, and now Pyotr understood. Her hair was dark, her eyes green, just like the others. The maidens had been *rusalka*, every one, and now the young men they had danced with were no more.

"It might not have been in winter, Pyotr. It might have been on a day like this." She spread her arms wide as if she would embrace spring itself. "Would you have sought to love me, here in the sunlight, down by the water? What if I had come to you then?"

"Anya?" It was, but it could not be. "I am in my great-aunt's mansion," Pyotr said. "This isn't real."

"Then neither am I," said the *rusalka*. "But perhaps I was, once. For a little while. If I would be real again, embrace me." She opened her arms to him, but Pyotr took a step back.

"You've chosen," she said. "I wish I could."

Pyotr stepped back and closed the door behind him. The sunlight was gone, the meadow was gone. He was back in the secret corridor, alone save for cobwebs and spiders. He kept moving until, at long last, he came to the final door.

Pyotr heard women's voices only this time. He recognized the sound of the *rusalka*'s voice and knew he was getting close. But who was the other? Pyotr opened the secret panel.

"...were so tiny, and now so changed, but I knew you the moment I saw you."

It was Great-Aunt Svetlana. She was alone in the room with Anya, who was perched on the edge of a massive four-poster bed, regarding the old woman kneeling on the floor before her impassively.

"I remember the swan," Anya said.

The old woman nodded and dabbed at her eyes with a wadded handkerchief. "You deserve to know the rest. Once I was sure, I went abroad with one trusted servant; that was easy enough to arrange. My poor Masha died of a fever in Italy, so no one else knew. When I was strong enough to travel again I resolved to return to my father and face the consequences. I'm afraid my resolve lasted only as far as the river."

"I remember the swan," Anya repeated. "It was very beautiful."

"I almost destroyed it, afterward, but I couldn't. At last I decided to give it to Pyotr instead. I won't beg your forgiveness for what I did, but would you like one last ride in the sleigh?" the old woman asked. "That is the least of what I owe you."

"I don't understand," Anya said. "But yes, please take me in the sleigh. Take me to the river. Take me away from Pyotr."

The old woman smiled. "I will, I promise...Anya? It's a lovely name. I don't blame Pyotr. If things had worked themselves out differently, I might have called you that."

The old woman raised herself off the floor with difficulty. Anya did not offer to help. Pyotr was finding it harder to think, but somehow that made things clearer. He believed he understood some of what he had seen, but this? His great-aunt on her knees before the *rusalka*? Was this real or another dream? He didn't know. But someone did.

Anya. My great-aunt. They know. They know the answer.

Pyotr started to throw the panel open wide but his legs would no longer carry him. He saw the candle drop from his hand and nearly snuff out from the dust, with only a few sparks remaining. Pyotr slumped down against the wall of the secret corridor.

"Anya...."

If either woman heard anything, they gave no sign. Great-Aunt Svetlana took Anya's hand and led her from the room. Pyotr tried to call after them, could not. The last spark winked out and left him in darkness.

When Pyotr came to himself again he was lying in the bed in his room, fully clothed. His head felt three sizes too big, and when he sat up it was all he could do to keep from being sick. He groaned and made his way to the tray Alexi had brought him the night before. There was little more than an amber residue left in the snifter; despite his queasiness Pyotr could discern the aroma of a fine brandy. And now perhaps something else. He still wasn't sure.

Pyotr threw open the door to his room, determined to do what he had to do if the guard tried to prevent him from leaving, but the outside corridor was empty. He staggered down to the room he knew had been Anya's. It was empty, too. Pyotr ran through the echoing mansion until he found Alexi again.

"Where is Anya?"

"Your young lady? The countess

took her for a drive early this morning."

"Alexi, what did you put in my brandy?"

The old servant looked puzzled. "Nothing, sir, I swear. The countess prepared your nightcap personally."

Pyotr managed to leave the house before being sick in the snow. More snow was falling; the sky was so thick and dark that he could barely tell it was morning. Pyotr ran to the stables as soon as he trusted his legs to obey him, but his sleigh was not there. The groom on duty confirmed that the Countess Orlovskaya had taken the young lady in the swan *troika*, accompanied by two menservants.

"They drove toward the city," he said.

Pyotr commandeered one of his great-aunt's geldings and saddled and bridled the beast himself. He had not ridden more than a league when he met the two servants returning to the estate on foot. One carried a saw, the other an ax. Pyotr dismounted in a fury and accosted the two men.

"What did you do?"

The two merely looked at him for a moment, startled. Pyotr knew how wild his appearance must have been to them. He did not care. He grabbed the shoulders of the man carrying the ax and shook him hard. "What did you do to her?"

"Who do you mean, sir?" the man finally managed.

"Anya! The young lady who was with my aunt! If you've harmed her, orders or no orders, I swear—"

"Sir, we harmed no one. We only cut a hole in the ice on the river, as the countess commanded us," said the shorter man carrying the saw. "She never said what she wanted it for, and we did not dare ask. Then she dismissed us."

"A hole...?" Pyotr didn't finish. He practically leapt back into the saddle and spurred his horse toward the river, leaving the two servants to stare, uncomprehending, in his wake.

Pyotr found the swan sleigh and the horse tied up to a post near the bridge. He ran past the sleigh and down to the river. He could tell where the hole had been, but it had already frozen over again and new snow lay thick across the scene. There was no sign of either Anya or the Countess Orlovskaya. Pyotr pounded on the ice until it cracked and his hands went numb, but the ice did not yield. Then he ran up and down the riverbank, calling Anya, calling his great-aunt, and there was no answer.

It was only when he finally trudged back to the sleigh that he noticed the letter, sealed with his great-aunt's signet, on the bench. The cold wax snapped with a sound like a gunshot.

Darling Petya,

You will blame yourself, I know that. I ask that you trust me, I, who have never lied to you, when I tell you that, contrary to what a young man usually believes, not everything in this world is about you. You have my love and my blessing, now and always.

Svetlana

The passing months gradually took the snow and ice away for a while, and the river ran sparkling and clear again. Pyotr went to the river then and sat on the riverbank. He wasn't sure why. He thought perhaps he was waiting for Anya to return and call him a fool as she promised, or for Great-Aunt Svetlana to appear and explain that, yes, he was indeed a fool, but nothing happened. Pyotr, later Count Pyotr Grigorevich Orlovsky, never saw Anya or his great-aunt again. In time he married a suitable young woman and, to honor his aunt, sired a large and relatively happy family.

Yet every winter until the day he died, on fine nights of the crescent moon when the snow was crisp and the air was clear, Pyotr would observe the odd custom of going alone for long drives in his fanciful sleigh, along the riverbank away from the city. At a certain spot he would always stop his horse and sit staring at the river, a solitary figure bundled up all alone in the shadow of the black swan.

About the Author:

Richard Parks lives in Mississippi, and despite several attempts to leave, remains there. His short fiction has appeared in *Realms of Fantasy, Tor.com, Weird Tales,* and *Asimov's SF,* among other places. His third short story collection, *On the Banks of the River of Heaven,* has recently been published by Prime Books. His second novella from PS Publishing, *The Heavenly Fox,* is forthcoming.

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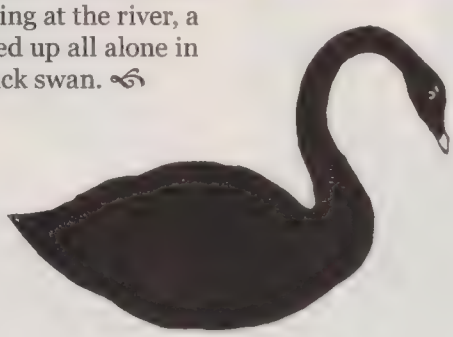

They say that smell is the most evocative of the senses. But what does love smell like?

Thirteen Incantations

By
Desirina Boskovich

Illustration by
Kurt Huggins

In the South, spring unfolds like magic, temporary and tantalizing. And then it becomes summer, something else entirely. This year, the cusp fell on the last week of school. Spring ripened into sticky summer, while seniors dreamed of future cities. Sun-drenched mornings and long-lit evenings made homework feel irrelevant. Euphoria infected the school like a virus.

This was the week that things began between Elisabeth and Ana Celina.

Elisabeth had lived in the same house in the same neighborhood since the week she was born. With dishwater blonde hair and liquid blue eyes, she looked like everyone else in her family, all the way back to the great-grandparents who first eked out livings on North Carolina farms. Her family was average: one mother, one father, one boy, one girl, even a dog and a cat. (The pets kept to themselves.) She liked reading more than television. She'd known many of her classmates since first grade. She was not popular, but neither was she disliked.

Ana Celina was the new girl. She stumbled into their suburban world, ridiculous with her clinking bracelets and swinging skirts and vivid scarves. In the cafeteria she held court with the misfits, leaning into long conversations, poring over the dog-eared sketchbooks they showed her. At parties she came early and stayed late, smuggling in a bottle of red wine. In the long hallway between classes, her laughter rang through the noise like a melody. Everyone loved her.

For months, Elisabeth sat behind Ana Celina in English class. Ana Celina's energy was thrilling and worrying; it made Elisabeth long for something indefinable. Occupied by these thoughts, Elisabeth missed the best parts of *Hamlet* and *Madame Bovary*, but knew exactly how many freckles Ana Celina had on each shoulder. Seven on the left, four on the right.

Things went on like this until one day in late spring. Elisabeth sat by herself, reading *The Awakening* and eating lunch: bologna sandwich, juice box, and chips. It was the same lunch her mother made for her every morning. Elisabeth didn't even like bologna. In fact, she was thinking about becoming a vegetarian.

Suddenly, Ana Celina materialized beside her. "Grace said you live off Oakland Street," she said, by way of introduction.

Elisabeth swallowed hastily. "I do."

"So do I. Oh, doesn't that book just make you want to strangle someone?"

Elisabeth knew Ana Celina's house, though she'd never been inside. It was a gloomy Victorian, unlike any of the other houses in the neighborhood. *They make faces at it*, Ana Celina would say. The other homes were solid and practical, ranch-style brick with aluminum shutters and earth-toned trim. If you used the bathroom at your neighbor's house, you didn't need to ask for directions.

Ana Celina's house was built of wood, with a wrap-around porch and arched Victorian windows. It was the color of milk chocolate, with intricate pink and crimson trim. And it was right off the main road, where everyone could see it. The neighbors didn't know how this had come about, but they weren't happy about it.

"So," Ana Celina said. "You want to come over sometime?"

Elisabeth had been curious about the Victorian house for years. Once she was inside, it won her over. The house was filled with ephemera, harvested from a lifetime of travel: copper plates, ceramic vases, Persian rugs in burgundy and yellow, eclectic art pieces. Window shelves held glass bottles in turquoise and blue. Crystals dangled over the kitchen sink, spinning rainbows from light. Potted plants grew lush. Nothing matched. It was a mishmash of beloved things that formed a charmingly incoherent whole.

The two girls sat in Ana Celina's room. Ana Celina's gray cat rubbed at their ankles, demanding affection. They talked about college; it was all anyone talked about these days. Elisabeth was going to a state university three hours away. Ana Celina was headed to a school in London. "I need a break from Neve," she explained.

"Neve?"

"My mom. Come on. I'll introduce you. She's probably down in her secret lab." Ana Celina rolled her eyes.

Elisabeth followed Ana Celina through the house—down the stairs, past the kitchen, to a closed door. Ana Celina knocked, then paused, waiting for the muffled "Come in."

Ana Celina opened the door and fragrance rushed out like the surf. Fleeting florals, ripe fruits, fresh greenery, ancient spices: each scent struggled to make itself known. Stunned, Elisabeth gazed around the room. It was large, and filled with shelves. Each shelf was lined with trays. Each tray was packed with finger-sized vials.

Neve sat in the middle of the room, at a desk stacked high with tumbling sheaths of paper. She wore a crimson tunic. Her dark hair was short and curly; her eyes were gray, dancing with light, just like Ana Celina's.

"Hello, girls," she said, smiling. "You must be Elisabeth. Welcome to my secret lab. As you can see, this is where I concoct my brews."

"She's a perfumer," Ana Celina explained. "She works on contract for perfume brands. She creates new scents for their lines."

"Like Calvin Klein and stuff?" Elisabeth asked.

They nodded.

"Are those all perfumes?" Elisabeth asked, gesturing at the vials that lined the walls.

"Not yet," Neve said. "More like ingredients, really."

Neve was unlike any mom Elisabeth knew. Elisabeth's own mother was a housewife—except for Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays when she worked mornings in the office at their church. She didn't even wear perfume.

Elisabeth wanted to stay and ask Neve dozens of questions. She wanted to sniff every vial, maybe even sample a perfume that no one else had ever worn before.

But Ana Celina seemed anxious to leave. "Come on," she said, pulling her away. "I'll make you a snack."

Elisabeth helped Ana Celina grill

cheese sandwiches and slice Granny Smith apples. Sitting at Ana Celina's kitchen table, eating off fine china and drinking from a blue plastic tumbler, Elisabeth was totally content.

Days passed, as summer sprawled uneventfully. The girls began spending the evenings together and then sleeping over. They went to bookstores and coffee shops and art supply stores. They explored the woods that bound their neighborhood together, connecting the streets and cul-de-sacs like musculature. The woods became their favorite place, cool and quiet during the hot afternoons.

Then a day came when everything changed.

It began like all the other days. They were in the woods, sitting side by side on the surface of a large boulder, watching the creek as it flowed below. It streamed through wooded hills, fast and narrow at some places, wide and still at others, collecting silt and wishes on its way. The drought had left banks of muddled red clay; summer thunderstorms would choke the creek with rain once more. Elisabeth's feet dangled over the water's edge; her palms lay flat against the stone. In the breeze, Ana Celina's hair tickled whisper-soft against Elisabeth's bare shoulder, an accidental intimacy. They were silent, thinking private thoughts, appreciating the music of chirping birds, running water, quarreling squirrels.

Then Ana Celina turned and looked at Elisabeth.

"I have a secret for you," she said.

Elisabeth's heart beat faster, a rhythm that spiraled into itself. "Okay," was all she could manage.

"It's complicated."

"Yes?"

"It's about my mom."

"Oh," Elisabeth said, her breath whooshing outward. "What is it?" she asked, confident that this secret couldn't be as interesting as her own.

"She's a witch."

Elisabeth laughed, but Ana Celina didn't laugh with her.

"I'm serious. It's not black magic or anything like that. But she knows some spells. Most of them have to do with perfume."

Ana Celina tended to exaggerate, making this revelation a bit hard to take. Elisabeth waited for further explanation, but none came. "Like, real magic?" she asked finally.

"Yes," Ana Celina said. "Real magic. Her mother taught her. And *her* mother taught *her*, I guess."

"What other spells does she know?" Elisabeth hoped for the classics: spells to make yourself beautiful, or rich, or beloved by the one who meant most to you.

"Little things. Finding lost socks. Mending broken dishes. Making flowers grow."

"No beauty potions?"

"No."

"No curses against your enemies?"

"I don't think so."

"Oh."

"The perfumes she makes for work have just a teeny-tiny bit of magic in them. The ones with real magic, she keeps for herself."

"Have you tried them?"

"That's the thing. I found this box."

"What's in it?"

"Perfumes. Twelve of them. They're magic. I held a couple of the vials in my hand. They have that tingle. I feel it in my fingertips."

"And?"

"I want to try them. With you."

"Does your mom know you found them?"

"Maybe," Ana Celina said, looking away and twirling a strand of hair around her index finger. "I think she wanted me to find them."

The box was in Ana Celina's bedroom, beneath the bed. The girls sat facing each other, solemn and cross-legged, the box between them. It was the size of a shoebox, made of wood. The lid was a paper collage of exploding roses and foreign architecture.

Inside the box were twelve vials, each the size of Elisabeth's little finger.

The girls watched each other, tense and tingling.

"Let's do it," Ana Celina said finally. "You pick."

The vials weren't numbered; their titles were hand-written in black ink on white labels. Elisabeth chose *First Herb Garden in the City.* Trembling slightly, she handed the vial to Ana Celina.

With practiced fingers, Ana Celina popped the stopper from the vial. She placed her index finger over the opening, and tipped it to the side so the liquid coated her finger. She dabbed it onto her collarbone and the insides of her elbows. Then she handed it to Elisabeth, who did the same.

They stretched out on the bed with their hands tucked behind their heads and their eyes closed.

The fragrance washed over them and created a world.

Notes of bay leaf, basil, and parsley evaporate first, complex and aromatic...then subtle sage and French lavender...and the ethereal sweetness of honeysuckle. More complicated scents: moist potting soil, the musty rot of old gardening gloves, and the sharp tang of cedar wood, warmed by the sun.

Scents evolve into sensations: the sun warming the wood is hot on her neck. The traffic is a faraway voice below, murmuring and bellowing by turns. A gray haze of pollution floats over the city skyline, thickening in the distance.

Neve tends her garden, teaching her plants to flourish with the kindest and gentlest spells she knows.

The scent faded. Or rather, the memory faded—the world it evoked shimmered and then disappeared. The scent remained, a fragrant whiff of basil and honeysuckle.

The girls smiled faintly at one oth-

"I think she wanted me to find them."

er. Elisabeth blushed, looked away, unable to speak.

Ana Celina sat up, resting her arms on folded knees. Her hair curtained her face, flowing straight on either side. "See?" she said, her mouth laughing, her eyes inscrutable. "I told you. You didn't believe me, did you?"

"I didn't know what you meant. Ana, can you do this? Will your mother teach you the spells?"

"I'll never let her."

"Why not?"

"Magic devours people. I'm never going to be that person."

"But—"

"I don't want to talk about it."

In silent agreement, they waited several days before returning to the box, until the lingering scent in the creases of their arms had faded completely.

Ana Celina deliberated, stroking fingertips along the white labels, inspecting her mother's looping cursive. Elisabeth waited.

Eventually Ana Celina spoke: "This one."

Chance Meeting in Istanbul

Opium-bitter and cinnamon-rich smells of incense, washed with faded curls of tobacco. A whiff of crushed grape leaves. Dark-roasted coffee. Aromas of food: spicy meat dripping fat, eggplant sizzling in fresh olive oil. The air is thick with pollution, a heaviness to every breath that stinks of ozone and leaded fuel. Base notes flutter with a slight ocean breeze.

Neve navigates crowded streets, the scents carrying her, noise blending in uneven registers. She turns a corner, and there he is. His face emerges from the faceless crowd. He's exactly as beautiful as she remembers: the dark hair, studious eyes, three-day-old shave. His smile is quick. Recognition hits her, a punch in the stomach, and then her chest soars upward, leaving her bruised stomach behind. It's him. Always him, in the middle of nowhere, in the center of everywhere.

Elisabeth dragged her fingers across the surface of Ana Celina's puffy comforter, remembering the man's face—handsome and familiar.

"That's your father," Elisabeth said.

"Yes."

"Do you remember him?" Elisabeth asked.

"Not really. He left when I was small. I don't think he liked magic very much."

Elisabeth wondered how anyone could dislike magic this fragile and perfect, but the expression on Ana Celina's face told her not to say more. Instead, they rested together, fingers barely touching, until they fell asleep. They napped through the late afternoon until the sun slanted low through the windows.

A Day in the Orchard, Gathering Peaches

Mellow essence of peach, sweet as syrup. The green leaves rustling in the summer breeze. The stickiness of sap trickling down bark. The living smell of warm dirt. The sun warming the aluminum ladder. Sheer fuzz sticking to Neve's fingers and hands. Neve is young, girl-sized, full of curiosity. There's an ache in her shoulders as she reaches above her head, and the muted "thunk" of each peach as she drops it into the pail. A fleeting scent memory, as she imagines the cinnamon-clove spice of hot peach pie. Her mother wears a colorful head scarf and sings an incomprehensible song. One day she'll teach Neve the words, but not yet.

"Tell me about your grandmother," Elisabeth asked.

So Ana Celina explained her family history, and how secret knowledge passed from mother to daughter. For generations, the family lived in Grasse, the perfume capital of the world. In the old days, Ana Celina's great-grandfather had been renowned for his fragrances. But Ana Celina believed that his signature perfumes were really the work of her great-grandmother. "That's what Neve thinks, anyways."

Elisabeth returned home one afternoon to find her mom dusting the guest room.

"Back from Ana's house?" Margaret asked as she cleaned the lamp.

"Yeah," Elisabeth said. "Who's coming over?"

Margaret shifted her attention to the desk, rubbing the dust cloth in expert circles. "Trey's bringing his girlfriend over for the weekend."

Elisabeth's brother was a junior in college. His girlfriend wore red baseball caps over a swinging blonde ponytail, and short denim skirts over long tan legs. She fulfilled their mother's expectations completely.

"Run get some clean sheets, sweetie." Elisabeth's mom gestured toward the hall closet.

Elisabeth found a fresh pair, scented of laundry detergent and the clothesline. (In summer, her mom aired the linens outside before putting them in the dryer. It was one of Elisabeth's favorite things about warm weather.) Together, they stripped and remade the bed.

"I'll probably be making this bed up for your boyfriends before too long," Margaret said. "Can't believe my little girl's going off to college so soon."

Elisabeth smiled, but didn't answer. The moment evoked a memory: a day several years ago, her brother's first big date. Their mother had hugged him by the door, straightening his shirt collar, telling him to have fun and be real careful. After closing the door, she'd turned to Elisabeth, sitting at the kitchen table with her homework. "I'll probably be telling you the same thing before too long," Margaret had said, looking misty.

She said it differently now. Like

"Magic devours people."

she was reassuring herself most of all.

This was why Elisabeth never answered. It was the kind of secret that became too big to tell anyone, even yourself. It was the kind of secret that fell apart when you forced it into words.

"Yeah," she said. "I'm going to miss you guys."

She helped her mother straighten the bookshelves and fluff the pillows. She wondered if her mother knew how silly it was to enact this guest room charade; undoubtedly Trey's girlfriend would sneak up to his bedroom once the lights were out. Elisabeth suspected that her mother did know this, yet observed the ritual anyway. Rituals were the straight lines they walked along, charades the defenses that kept their lives in check.

Cabin in the Mountains, with Him

Maple syrup and the rich oils of freshly chopped walnuts. Tender golden waffles, hot off the iron. Crackling fireplace, dancing flames tinged with pine smoke and sizzling sap. The dense warmth of the cabin air. Earthy smell of goose-down comforters. Pungent coffee brewing, drip-drip-drip. She's warm all over, shuffling in wool socks. He drizzles syrup on her waffle in a complex pattern of circles and stars. With his index finger he rubs the tip of her nose. They grin at each other. They don't need to say a word, so they don't.

"Do you wish you could see him?" Elisabeth asked.

"Maybe. Yes. Of course."

"Where is he?"

"Somewhere in Europe. Neve doesn't like to talk about it. Maybe she doesn't know."

"Why did he leave?"

"I don't know. Because Neve was always more wrapped up in making perfume than anything else. Because she wanted to have adventures. Because she's never really gotten around to understanding that she is a grown-up and this is real life. I guess she thought that magic excused her from all that."

Surprised by Ana Celina's outburst, Elisabeth was quiet for a moment. Though she accepted it, she never understood the tension between Ana Celina and Neve. Neve was interesting and charming, and let Ana Celina do whatever she wanted. Sometimes she even gave them a bottle of red wine, or money for dinner at restaurants they could never afford.

Elisabeth thought for a while. "Maybe he left for the same reasons that people always leave."

"Like what?" Ana Celina asked, strangely hostile. But Elisabeth didn't have an answer. She thought about her own father, who lived with them, yet had seemed absent for years. She had no scents with which to remember him, not even a scrapbook. She wanted to tell Ana Celina that fathers didn't matter. *We don't need fathers,* she would say. *We don't need men, we don't need boys. We can be perfectly happy on our own, together.* But she was afraid that Ana Celina wouldn't understand.

Cooking Dinner with Him

The crisp sweetness of red bell peppers and refreshing cucumber. Sweet mango and acidic pineapple. Conflicting scents of mint, cilantro, and basil. Fresh pressed garlic. Mingled juices messy on her fingers.

His aftershave is citrus, aromatic—notes of lemon, bergamot, musk, cedarwood. His smell is something different, a scent that only exists in her mind... Comfort.

"She was so happy then," Ana Celina said, speaking first. "Doesn't she seem happy? Not like now. Always sitting alone, working or drinking wine."

"She seems comfortable," Elisabeth said cautiously.

"But she could never be comfortable," Ana Celina grumbled. "Oh, no. We have to travel around the world, always searching for new scents and things. She acts like her whole life is about finding new stuff, just so she can remember it later on."

"I think she knew that she couldn't be happy unless she lived a life with lots of adventure and excitement," Elisabeth said carefully. She thought this sounded very much like Ana Celina herself. But she wasn't sure if Ana Celina knew it yet.

"I don't understand why we can't just live a normal life," Ana Celina said. "No perfume. No stupid magic."

But why would you want a normal life? Elisabeth wondered, but didn't say aloud.

"How come we never go to your house?" Ana Celina said. "I want to go to your house."

"Because it's boring," Elisabeth said.

"So?" Ana Celina said, then: "No it's not."

"Okay," Elisabeth sighed. "We'll go to my house this time."

They walked through the woods together, Ana Celina leading the way. They emerged from the woods in Elisabeth's backyard, blinking in the blazing sun. The world smelled of warm pine straw and melting asphalt.

It was a Thursday, which meant that Elisabeth's mother would be at home and her father would be at work.

Her parents had a bad marriage, but it was the boring kind. They never got into fights because they never talked. Elisabeth's father spent his time mowing the lawn, washing the car, and organizing the garage. Elisabeth's mother spent her time vacuuming the floors, polishing the furniture, and making balanced meals. The garage was very neat, with a spotless concrete floor. Dinner was very predictable, with a meat, a starch, and a vegetable. Occasionally, her parents discussed the news, or how messy the neighbor's yard looked.

I will never get married, Elisabeth vowed whenever she thought about them.

Elisabeth and Ana Celina banged through the screen door, and took off their shoes; that was the rule. "Hey," Elisabeth called.

Her mother appeared from the kitchen. "Hey, Liz," she said. "Oh, hello, Ana Celina. Would y'all like some cookies?"

"Hi, Margaret," Ana Celina said. "Yes, please."

Margaret pulled away the plastic wrap from a plate of cookies and offered it to them. Elisabeth rummaged in the refrigerator for her carton of soy milk.

Margaret was comfortably middle-aged—a little pudgy around the mid-

dle, but tall enough to carry it well. She maintained her figure by going to step aerobics twice a week with ladies from church. Her blonde hair was darker than Elisabeth's, with tones of gray and gold, cut into a smooth shoulder-length bob. It was the haircut she'd had for years.

Margaret sat at the table and watched them eat, taking nothing for herself. Now that she was in her forties, she hardly ate anymore. On the mantel was a picture of Elisabeth's parents at their high school prom, looking impossibly young and fresh-faced. Sometimes Elisabeth caught Margaret staring wistfully at the picture. She wondered if her mother was remembering the days when she and Elisabeth's dad still loved each other, or the days when she was pretty and thin.

Elisabeth munched her cookie. Ana Celina talked, laughed, complimented the cookies, dipped her cookies in milk, dropped crumbs on the table, clattered around the kitchen looking for paper towels. Elisabeth watched her. It was impossible not to; she was an irresistible force, drawing Elisabeth's attention with magnetic power.

Elisabeth glanced at her mother, sitting at the table with her hands folded. While Elisabeth watched Ana Celina, Elisabeth's mother watched Elisabeth, worry in her eyes. She saw the adoration on Elisabeth's face, the unrequited longing. For a moment their eyes touched, and Elisabeth understood. She wanted to say: *What, me? You're the one with problems.* But she just looked away.

Swing Set by the Pier

Aquatic notes, synthetic but tantalizing with a tang of salt, sweet undertone of fresh watermelon. Rotting vegetation, algae, damp wood. An aura of fish, gleaming scales, gutted insides; accumulated scum on the dank undersides of the pier.

Gently lapping waves as tame as a riverbank, licking the white sandbar. Cold sand scuffing beneath bare feet. The distinctive pungency of metal, clinging to their fingers. The swings creaking wearily. Their bare toes trailing lines in the sand. The gulf is impossibly dark and the waves lap invisibly on the beach. This is their last moment; goodbye is coming, so they let the silence linger, as the end inches closer with each groan of the swing set. Once your heart's been broken, there's nothing left to say.

Affected by the fragrance, Elisabeth and Ana Celina didn't say anything either. But Elisabeth thought ahead to the fast-approaching future when they would say goodbye, too. She wanted things to end joyously, with promises of more to come. Which meant there were many things that simply must remain unsaid.

It was an evening in late July. They sat with Neve in the living room, as she drank wine and studied a creative brief. Then she read it aloud.

It described a woman, the kind of woman that every woman longs to be: sexy but reserved, alluring but restrained, ever the object of unrequited love and never its victim. It was Neve's job to decide what this woman should smell like.

"Ideas?" Neve asked, refilling her wine glass.

"Lemon ice," Elisabeth said.

"Violets," Ana Celina said.

"I imagine her on a sailboat," Neve said. "Sitting to one side. Laughing a little, an obscure smile on her face. Raking her fingers through her hair."

"Not aquatic, though," Ana Celina said.

"No," Neve said. "Too open. It has to be something more sophisticated and mature."

"Amber and iris," Ana Celina said.

Ana Celina flipped through the stacks of fashion and beauty magazines that Neve kept for inspiration. The fashion spreads sparked ideas, fleeting visions of potential scents. Perfume is about the future as much as it is about the past; it draws on desire, even as it plays with our memories.

Ana Celina browsed the magazines, comparing herself to the supermodels, with their endless legs and glossy complexions. "Don't be silly," Elisabeth said. "They're not even real." She thought about launching into a speech about tools of the patriarchy, but usually that was Ana Celina's job.

Ana Celina shrugged. "Real or not, I still wish I looked like that. Oh, and I still wish he was my boyfriend. Delicious." She pointed to a Dior or Ralph Lauren man that looked like a boy. He was shirtless and gorgeous, perfectly sculpted. He didn't look real either.

Elisabeth felt a flash of betrayal, which faded immediately into the bloom of embarrassment. She picked up a magazine for herself and didn't say anything else.

They looked at the pictures, but they didn't rip apart the paper tabs to smell the perfume. Those samples were empty now, nothing more than pretty scents. They weren't alive, and they had no stories to tell.

Rock Concert, Wearing His Perfume

Essence of rose, rose absolute. The sheerest hint of violet and mandarin. Rich base notes of woody ambers, golden and glowing. Neve wears this scent layered between her breasts and on her wrists. The scent is her intoxication, her fever-dream. There's the haze of cigarette smoke and the tang of beer on the breath of the man beside her, the salt of her own sweat. Music crashes around her, and the musician she loves screams into his microphone, his voice soaring upwards from his slender frame. She's close enough to see his tattoos.

Every time she brushes away her hair, her gold bracelets tinkle against her skin and she breathes the scent emanating with her pulse, the scent that remains her favorite. It's the scent she made when she fell in love with him. Like the daughter they created together, with her freckled cheeks and frank smile and heart-shaped face. He will remain with her always. She can't decide if that's consolation. So she loses herself in the music and tries not to miss the feeling of his arms around her.

Summer faded. The trees were no longer as vibrantly green, and the thunderstorms came in full force. Clouds rolled in midday, pouring torrential rains on hot pavement so that steam rose from the puddles. Thunder rang like gunshots, bathing the sky in

electric light.

Summer faded and fall drew closer, bringing immense waves of change. Ana Celina would leave for London in just two weeks. Elisabeth felt she was already losing her, as if Ana Celina was drifting away even when they were side by side.

They sampled *Parade in New York City, 1986*. Afterward, Ana Celina smiled. "She knows I have the box," Ana Celina said. "She wants us to explore the rest. Maybe she thinks it will make me change my mind."

"*Will* it make you change your mind?" Elisabeth asked.

"No," Ana Celina said, but she shrugged, and Elisabeth could tell it wasn't that simple anymore.

They tried *Philosophy at the Café in Paris. Lost Without a Map in Rome. Possible Fairy Sighting.*

Until only one remained. In silent agreement, they'd both saved it for last.

If not now, then never.

First Kiss

They embraced ritual, brushing scent on their wrists and clavicles.

Essence of roses, rose absolute. It flutters; it wavers; it remains, pure and true. The cream tinged with pink. The irresistible red. Roses complicated by middle notes: duplicitous jasmine and finicky heliotrope. Vanilla: a warm beginning that darkens to a seductive core.

A garden at twilight, when the blooms drift shut and the scents are strongest. The first star appears; it's not a star at all, but Venus, flickering unevenly, lit with the brilliance of its flaming sky.

He stands beside her, his arm around her shoulders. His arm circles tighter, pulls her in close. His jaw inches toward hers. Stars explode on the insides of her eyelids.

Ana Celina and Elisabeth lay side by side. Their eyes opened slowly. Their arms were sweet with the fragrance of roses. Elisabeth's heart thudded inside her chest, flushing her cheeks with roselike pink. She thought: *Now. If not now, then never.*

She glanced sideways at Ana Celina, dark hair spread across the pillow. Her cheeks were flushed and freckled. Her eyes remained half-closed, her lips slightly parted, her fingertips tense. Remembering. Or imagining—a world that happened before she was born, lives that excluded her before they conceived of her. Or maybe simply wanting.

Elisabeth saw everything Ana Celina thought, and none of it included Elisabeth. In her own way, Ana Celina had told Elisabeth everything she needed to know.

So then, never.

They'd opened the last vial. They'd dreamed the last dream. There was no more memory, only an ending. There was only the sensual summer, coming to an end and bringing goodbye.

When Elisabeth lay in bed that night, a cave tunneled its way through her chest, and an emptiness opened inside her arms.

Ana Celina left a week later.

The night before her flight, they sat in her living room, sharing a bottle of champagne with Neve. Bubbling with excitement, Ana Celina imagined the worlds that lay before her across the ocean; she dreamed aloud of adventures in faraway European cities. Elisabeth pretended to be happy for her. "Promise me you'll call whenever you come to visit," Elisabeth said. "I'll drive back to see you." It was only a couple hours; nothing like a trans-Atlantic flight.

Ana Celina promised she would. Elisabeth knew she wouldn't.

They hugged each other tightly, hair brushing each other's cheeks.

"I'll come in the morning to say goodbye," Elisabeth promised. "What time are you leaving for the airport?"

Ana Celina was vague. "After breakfast," she said, finally.

The next morning was humid, suffocating. The sky was gray with slow-moving clouds. Heat crackled anxiously in the air, anticipating rain. Elisabeth ran all the way through the woods, taking a simple comfort in the way her sneakers pounded against the dirt.

As she emerged from the woods on Ana Celina's side, the first thunderclap shook the treetops.

When she knocked on the door, it was Neve that answered.

"I came to say goodbye," Elisabeth said breathlessly, wiping sweat from her forehead.

Neve frowned. "I'm sorry. She left already. I just got back from dropping her off."

There was another earsplitting crack of thunder. For an instant, Elisabeth imagined it as an earthquake, the ground opening beneath her, a crevice widening between her feet. Lightning snaked across the sky.

Looking closer, Elisabeth saw Neve's red-rimmed eyes and pale smile. For a minute, she felt sorry for Neve; Ana Celina had left her, too. But then she remembered—all the memories, all the adventures, all the cities that Neve knew. Ana Celina deserved to know them too.

She hated them both, for everything they would do without her.

She turned abruptly for home. "Wait," Neve said. She disappeared into the house, leaving the door half-open. When she returned, she held an envelope. The word Liz was scrawled in looping cursive across the front. "She asked me to give this to you."

Elisabeth received the envelope cautiously. There was a lump in the middle, a shape she recognized. "Thank you," she said, even though she felt too sad to be polite.

"Come back and say hello sometime," Neve said.

"I will," Elisabeth said. She wouldn't.

She ran home. The storm inhabited the world in a war of light and noise, the first fat raindrops hitting the pavement just as she made it to her own yard.

She went to her bedroom and closed the door. She was trembling,

but she managed to open the envelope anyway.

Inside was a note, scratched in leaking black ink on creamy card stock.

My first. I let Neve show me a few things. I made it for you.

Love always,

Ana Celina

The note was wrapped around a vial, shaped like all the others.

Tears coursed down Elisabeth's cheeks. *I can't believe she left without saying goodbye,* she told herself, but it was a lie. Ana Celina was the kind of person who never wanted to say goodbye, or never needed to. Elisabeth wasn't surprised, not really, and that hurt the most. She flung herself across her bed and sobbed, drenching her pillow with a flood of tears.

There was a knock at the door. Elisabeth ignored it.

A minute passed; then her mother opened the door, peered in cautiously, and rushed to the bed.

Elisabeth tried to stop crying. She willed herself to corral the tears inside, or send them back to the source. She couldn't. She sobbed.

Margaret tucked Elisabeth's hair back and made soothing noises. "Oh, sweetheart," she said. "Did Ana Celina leave?"

"Ye-es," Elisabeth squeezed out.

Margaret shook her head in silent regret. "You poor thing." She got up, found tissues, offered them over. "You're heartbroken, aren't you."

Elisabeth nodded, blew her nose. She sniffled, and hiccuped, and blew her nose again.

Her mother petted her hair, and Elisabeth surrendered to it, feeling like a child again, lulled by her mother's gentle fingers. "Sweetie," her mother said. "There will be more girls, lots more. She never really saw you, anyway. She never got how special you are. But I know."

Elisabeth heard the quaver in her mother's voice. She didn't look at her. She couldn't.

"Everything will be all right," Margaret said, her hand still stroking Elisabeth's hair. Then she straightened her back and squared her shoulders, as if she'd made a decision, one she was determined to see to the end. "Trust me, sweetie. Everything will be all right."

A few days passed before Elisabeth opened the vial. Maybe she wanted to get over being angry; maybe she wanted to save it for later. She wasn't sure. She kept busy, packing for school, and shopping with her mother, who never stopped thinking of things Elisabeth might need.

Finally, she was ready.

She sat on the bed. Removed the vial. It wasn't labeled.

The liquid was perfectly clear. She dabbed a few drops on her collarbone, then swiped her fingertip across the crease in her arm. She stretched out, closed her eyes. She breathed out, breathed in, breathed out.

Delicate, woody smells of forest and moss. A hint of cool water, dark earth, smooth stone. Notes of magnolia and honeysuckle. Warm skin and hair.

The boulder at the edge of the stream that felt like the edge of the world. The hard swirls of granite, cool to their fingertips. The trickle of water below. The rustling in the trees, live with vibrations that began in the roots and traveled to the highest leaves.

The hollows in their knees. The freckles on their shoulders. Their drumming feet. Their slender fingers. Crooked smiles, shining eyes, swinging hair. A thudding heart.

I have a secret for you.

About the Author:

Desirina Boskovich is a graduate of the Clarion class of 2007. As a freelance writer, she specializes in weird, fantastic, and unlikely things, both true and imaginary. Her fiction has appeared in *Clarkesworld Magazine, Realms of Fantasy, Last Drink Bird Head, Fantasy Magazine,* and The *Way of the Wizard*; her nonfiction can be found in *Lightspeed Magazine* and *The Steampunk Bible.* She is working on a novel. Find her online at crackingdes.livejournal.com.

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Illustration by
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Smudge-face Cath, dress-torn and trembly, staring up at the great gaunt rider-man, hook-nosed, beak-faced, eyes glitter-bright and trapping. Trapping her. He's tall, tall like a harrier tipped sidewise on the wind, tall as a chestnut tree, tall as clouds—or so it seems to Cath, seven-summers Cath, the quick-eyed girl with curls for hair and lips pressed thin from thinking.

No thinking now. Not now. Trembling is all that's left. Water swirls higher against her knees, sucking at her, wanting her, asking her to be its best forever friend, and all before her the land lies clasped beneath a carpet of muddy wetness, gurgling and looping, a horizon not of fields and paths but of silt-brown eddies, foamy with twigs and bigger things, too: logs and chicken coops and chairs and half the valley people's better first-floor belongings.

"Flood!" her mother had yelled, right upon waking. "Everybody up!"

Wake and scramble they did, but did it help? No. Water wanted mother, wanted her badly, and in she went, chasing the panicked flailing pig, prattling (even as she sank) of bacon for winter, ham for winter, must have ham for the winter. And now, no ham, no bacon, no mother.

No father, either. Father went after the cow, the old brown cow, milky only on-and-off, grass dribbling daily from its fat chewing lips. But not today. Today, all cow did was flee the barn first chance it got, and off it raced until it hit deep water, the creekside gully lurking someplace beneath that level wet spread, and in went father with milky drowning cow, and Cath remembered, watching, that he'd always said he wasn't much use in deep water.

No mother, no father. No pig, no cow, and the chickens squawking in the branches, going higher every hop, leaving Cath, Little Cath Climber hugging onto a tree, the tree she'd climbed onto from out her attic window—Tight squeeze, tight!—then off across the limb and up the trunk, and up and over another limb, tree-to-tree, tree-to-tree, while behind, her little house vanished in the gurgling hungry water, so dirty and swollen, a river so pregnant it went as far as the eye could see, submerging field and forest, and moving, always moving, slithering southward as if life itself depended on its soft, terrible advance.

Tree-to-tree, then, squirrels in the lead and Cath in the middle and porcupines behind, until at last all reached higher ground. Good thing Cath can climb, oh, yes, or Cath would have joined the new riverfolk sure, those people on the water who floated face downward, their own limbs treelike now, so still, so calm, all splayed and beginning to swell. But not Cath. Not yet. She'd reached the slopes, the uptick of land that led high into hill country, and she'd scrambled on up, sandaled feet scooching pebbly rain-soaked dirt away beneath her, full step up, half step back, full step up, half step back, all sliding and slip-quick footwork and then, at the top, the old road, the road none but the long-distance peddlers used, the peddlers and tinkers and sometimes the soldiers, and there she stood, breathless. Heart thudding. Mind racing. Which way? Up, or down?

Up meant peakwise, passes with snow and people whose songs and tongues were beyond knowing. Up meant icy things and frost and traveler's tales that woke her still at night, even at seven, her breath flurrying, her skin clammy with fear-sweat.

No, up it could not be for Cath Valley-Born, for Cath Valley-Bred. Flat is known, while height is scary.

So down the road she'd scampered, but the road dipped, of course it dipped, it had to, for all roads love valleys. The trade and good inns, the easy grades, the sunny meadows. So down went the road, and with it Cath, until splash and sploosh, before she hardly knows it, she's up to her knees again. Uncertain, unsteady, and the current still churning, urging her on, bidding her enter, asking slyly and shyly, *May I have this dance?*

And then there, on hoof-proud shanks, legs like four timbers, the horse, the blue-black horse, and above it, the rider, veiny hands crossed on the pommel, leaning down, interest keen, mouth poised.

"You come from these valleys?"

Cath nods, can't look away. *Those eyes.*

"Your house?"

"Gone. I think."

"Your parents?"

Her eyes dart left, her eyes dart right. This she cannot answer. It's one thing to have seen—and that was bad—another to speak of it. Words bind, she knows this already, she's had a year of school. If you speak a thing, it's so. Better, then, not to say.

Silence. Silence in amongst the dripping pines, the *drip-pit-drop* of the trees shedding rain, so much rain, and worse upstream, up where the old dam is—or was. Silence from the squirrels, silence from the jays. Near silence, anyway, with interruptions from the whickering horse and a squelch of gravelly mud under one enormous hoof.

"Do you like birds?"

The rider's question, so sudden, stings with mystery. It makes no

"Do you like birds?"

sense. School-questions, those make sense, mostly, and proddings from her parents, her aunts—"Have you been good today?"—those are safe, easy to answer. But why birds? Why now?

"You do, I'm sure. I can see it in your eyes."

He's dismounted now, swinging himself down like a cat from a shelf, supple and fluid. The black boots vanish into the sopping brown, that awful liquid murk that took the pig and took the cow and—no. Stop, stop there. No speaking. No thinking.

The rider reaches, hands bony long, and Cath starts to squirm back—Time to run!—but he smiles, and a smile, a touch, these are presents she needs after this morning of theft, theft and water, and so her lips compress while the great hands press her shoulders, trail downward along her back, her spine, then pinch across the twin arches of her skinny-girl shoulder blades.

"Yes," says the rider, satisfied and almost smug, his smile the faraway kind, distant, pleased, inscrutable. "You'll do nicely."

Little Cath finds her voice, it erupts on its own. "I do like birds. I like to watch them fly."

"Of course you do." The rider's cloak billows and flutters as he lifts her onto the leather-smooth saddle. "Now tell me. What do you think of shine? Silver and gold?"

The first time it hurts. She feels that she is wood, wood splintering, and it hurts like nothing she's ever imagined, in ways she did not know were possible. But the second time, as her shoulder blades flex and bend before clawing at the underside of her skin, as they push and shove, then burst—skin cracking—heaving outward, unfurling, the bones slick and quick and feathered and growing, impossibly huge, deliciously light, yes. *Yes.* That second time there is no pain, only ecstasy, the ecstasy of swooping, weightless flight. She is still Cath, but little smudge-face Cath no longer. Now she is Cath Bird-Child, the girl with brilliant wings.

"Good," murmurs Jackdaw, eyes a-blaze. "Now go, and learn."

Learn she does, for Cath is swift not only in flight but in mind; she is apt, willing, almost desperate for the gift sprouting from her back. And from whom does she learn? Kith and kin. From the songbirds she learns to perch, to zip through tangles of thicket-thick branches. From the shorebirds, she learns the art of turning and wheeling as one. From the woodpeckers, she learns to unsteady her flight, to swoop and dip, dip and swoop. From the lark, she learns to shoot skyward, exulting all the way, and from the vulture, she learns to glide and soar. The falcon shows her how to plummet back to earth.

From Jackdaw, the rider, the one who gave the glorious gift, she learns to steal.

Rings for the fingers, studs for the ears, the delicate clasp of gold and glitter-glisten jewels for the neck or wrist.

Windows, mostly, that's where he sends her. High windows, small windows, the gaps in wood and brick where the highborn sleep and, wanting air, let the panes swing wide by night. In goes Cath, the sudden wings, height no barrier now, and the rich are so careless, leaving their daytime best all strewn about, drooping from shelves here, lying limp on the mantle there, now hiding in crafty little boxes and baskets: Rings for the fingers, studs for the ears, the delicate clasp of gold and glitter-glisten jewels for the neck or wrist. Then out goes Cath, perch-on-the-sill and flutter-wing Cath, back to Jackdaw, her pockets and fingers dripping with prizes.

Neither ever wants to part with their pretties. Who could, who would? Such gleamings and brightness. But sell they must, or they will starve.

They never sell in town, no. Onward, the direction hardly matters, and then, two or three counties removed, a quiet sale, coin palm-pressed to Jackdaw in exchange for the pretties, the winking silver and shiny stones, and then they ride on, purses and bellies filled, smiles on their faces if not entirely in their hearts. Robbery has a way of disquieting even the robber, and Cath minds her parents still. She knows that stealing is wrong, but what can she do? She's with Jackdaw now, and deep brown water laps and licks at those old admonitions, half-drowned and sopping, each one beginning "Thou shalt not..." Jackdaw understands how she feels, but it's the only life he knows, no other available. After all, he was taken, too.

"What was his name?" Cath asks, late one night, campfire crackling, her hands out to the flames, all but pleading for warmth.

"He was a she," says Jackdaw,

as dancing fire-shadow flickers his staring face. "Her name doesn't matter."

With bigger windows—towers and caves and barns, or anywhere there might be archers—Jackdaw still takes the risks himself, flapping in, gliding down, perching on the sill as he folds his wings—great wings, too, black and broad and big as night—and then in like a nosing ferret, furtive, fast, in for the seeking. Always he returns, pockets full, hands and fingers clutching, a sad smirk on his face. "So easy," he murmurs, his voice papery, as if old cornhusks lie jammed in his throat. "They do not learn."

Jackdaw and Cath, a team if not quite a pair, fly only at night. When others are near—and always in towns, villages—they hold their wings inside, a secret both precious and shameful.

He calls her new names, now. One name, really, a name she doesn't like. With most of their itinerant life, she demurs, accepts, plods on, rides far, complaint the farthest thing from her mind, but with her name, she resists. "Cath," she whispers, eyes down, toes in, wings tucked away as if they never were. "My name is Cath."

Flatland farms make her ill, sick to the core, so they ride past quickly, *clop-clop, whinny-whicker,* and all she can picture are the waters upstream, waiting for the day when they can rush down all at once and claim the land for theirs. *Stupid people, she thinks to herself, living each day as if nothing can happen. As if, when disaster strikes, they could sprout wings and just fly away.*

In villages and towns and cities, the sense of flood-threat recedes, and she comes alive. Doubly so, really, for with Jackdaw gone about his errands—and he has many, he's been everywhere, knows many, drinks too much—she flits away, hides in the bushes, watches the children, jealous of their schools and schooling, their easy games, their siblings, baby brothers, older sisters. Their families. Oh, her eyes do sparkle when she watches them at their games, hoops and hopscotch, jacks and tops and marbles. She joins when she can and is welcomed more often than not, but Jackdaw never tarries, not more than a day. "No nest-building for us," he says. "Learn to love migration."

He rises, he burns, a furious orange beacon bright against the hard black sky.

She does love it: the travel, change and change again, new scenes, fresh scenery. Languages, too. These Jackdaw teaches as best he can, and again she proves adept, a quick study. Still, memory sears her, school-house memories, neat little desks in orderly rows that never once went anywhere, never migrated a single yard, and she worships these now if for no better reason than they are what she was and what she cannot be.

Jealousy gnaws her, its teeth bite her bones, though she hides the wounds from Jackdaw. She is jealous of trees, of buildings, of anything with roots, people included, children most of all. The rush of stealthy pilfering, the awful chance of being caught, this never fails to rouse and raise her, but spying on the children, happy or sad, ah, yes. There they are, weeping from some too-slight injury or joyous at a newfound bauble, their emotions falling like leaves, their tethers tight and invisible and anchored to real live homes. These moments are what she lives for. A mere glimpse will do, it can set her heart alight, but it's a drug and as she grows, girl-skinny no longer, hips flaring, breasts pushing forward unbidden, she comes to see the pattern, to understand its sinister ebb and flow. Up, down, her moods turn on gyres of that which she sees and cannot have, the normalcy of others, the simple routines—feeding the chickens, scrubbing out the chamber pots—that she herself is forever now denied. Up, yes, but mostly down. Her greatest happinesses bring her hours, days, of blank, gray-scaped sorrow.

Under a half-moon in her fourteenth summer, he lies with her, once. Only once. Neither enjoys the coupling.

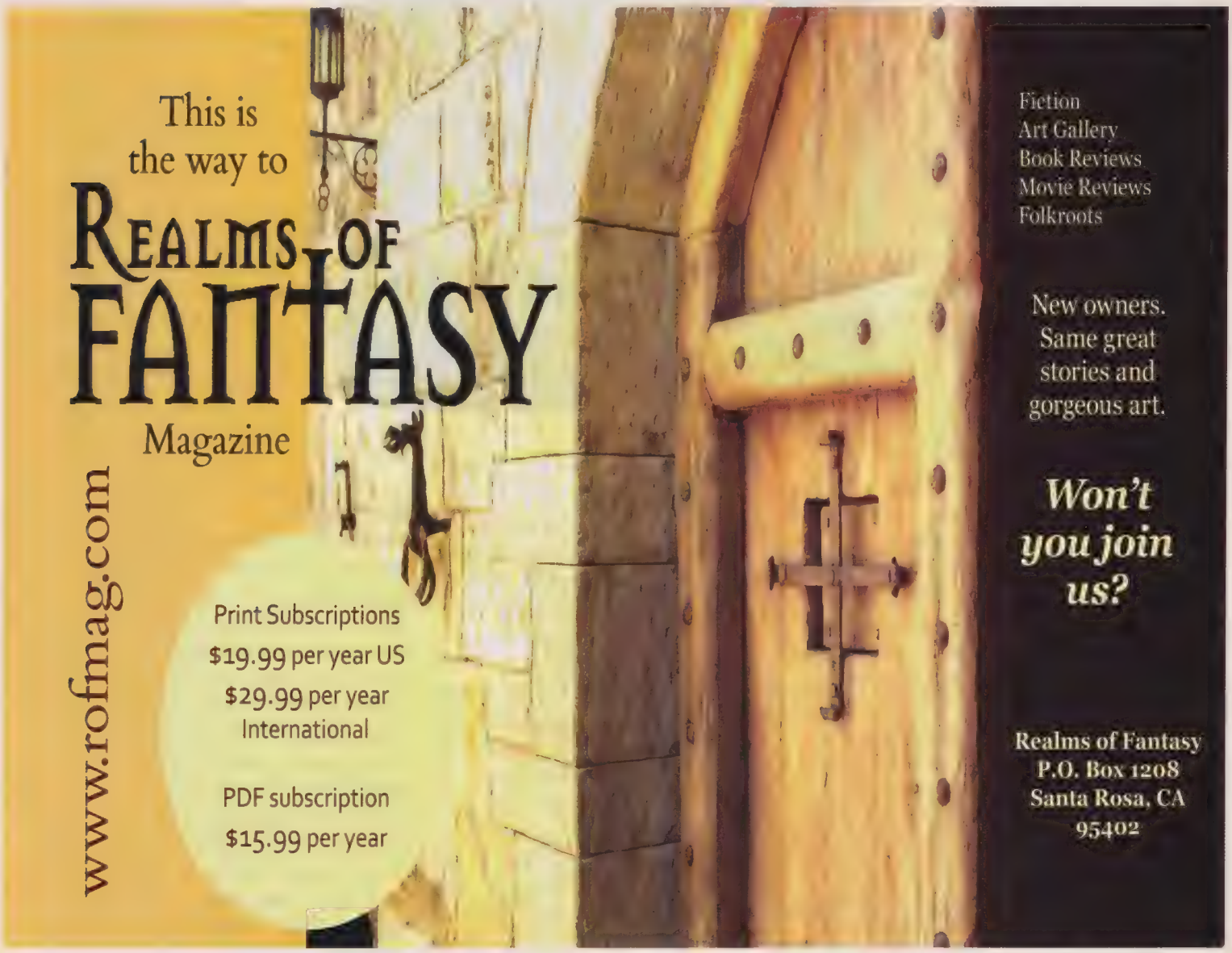
The first flex of wings hurt more, true, but this, too, is a kind of pain, and he has not prepared her. How can an exiled freak, and a man at that, raise a girl to womanhood? In the immediate panting aftermath, he realizes with terrible clarity that this was not the way—was, perhaps, the worst way possible. He staggers to his feet, stands, flies away and does not return until dawn and later. Neither speaks of that night again, as if by mutual consent they could stuff it back into the box of that which has never happened. Cath knows better. Older and wiser, this little smudge-face, knowing now in that

grim adult way that one can bury the thought of a drowning pig, yes, but the pig is still gone. The cow, too, gone. Mother and father and farm, gone; gone whether you think of them or not.

Jackdaw has other lovers. Many, in fact, an ever-repeating chorus of desires and affairs. He and Cath travel in circles, after all, marking out a certain well-known territory, and many stops are visited yearly, seasonally, Jackdaw and Cath flocking to the familiar despite their better instincts. And so Jackdaw knows many girls and women, and he was handsome once, striking in his avian way, but now Cath hears his wings unfurling brittle-crack, like twigs in ice, and the women in the towns, such ready partners in former years, see angry red scabs on Jackdaw's forehead, each one peeking out from where his hair has slid back, retreating faster with each flesh-freezing winter. The women see, too, the liver spots on the backs of his wide, gnarled hands. They do not like what they see. They mock him, hurl insults and even stones. "Away with you, old crow! Away!" Early to bed, then, for Jackdaw, early to an empty bed with only liquor for warmth and company. Cath lies awake these nights, and glooms about the future, for this, she sees, cannot go on forever.

For herself, she is past wanting friends, friends of her own. A lover? No. She has only the most vague idea of why anyone would want such a thing. But a baby, a plaything of her own to bring up and tend. That she understands. For this, she hankers and yearns and dreams.

Jackdaw drinks harder, rasps when he speaks, takes wing by daylight and far too close to town—his own commandments broken—



and he talks in circles, muttering. Invasions, pillaging, and fire: These are the secrets of this one's broken childhood, and he lays that evil time bare for Cath, tight-faced Cath, knees drawn up at firelight's feeble edge, ears pricked and eager for the next gem of detail, yet desperate for something, anything, to tamp and stopper this rush of bile and memory. Sleep wins out, always, but it is a fitful, tossing sleep, and one night, in a roadside clearing by a boulder-channeled brook, Jackdaw rolls into the remains of their smoldering campfire. His cloak and blankets catch, his hair next, and still half-asleep, he panics. Cath leaps for the feed-bucket, filled with water for the horse, but before she can douse Jackdaw's enflamed body, he springs into the air, his wings unfurling with blind emergency swiftness, thoughtless but certain, and he lofts up, feeding the hunger of his aerial pyre with every pumping wing beat.

He rises, he burns, a furious orange beacon bright against the hard black sky. The wind lashes him, it drives the tongues of fire to new frenzies, and Jackdaw screams, a blind howl to the heavens, and the heavens answer with silence.

Silence and, back on the ground, the hot-cold salty blindness of tears.

Then the great wings drop away in flaming chunks, and their owner falls after, a dying comet hurtling earthward, a falcon to the last. Cath's nostrils quirk at the smell of burnt hair, hair and twiggy ashen feathers.

Town and village, forest and field. Cath travels on, the horse her only companion. Days pass, weeks. Months. She had not realized the depth of her attachment.

And then, in spring, in the blessed blooming weeks when hearts and blood pump faster and new love leaps into being, crowing a champion's cry, she sees him: The boy-child Khavy, four summers gone, perhaps five. Bare feet padding in mud, mop-top golden in the sunlight, his curls reminding her of her own in earlier days, before age and care and the mysteries of birdhood darkened and straightened her locks. Khavy, eyes button-bright, smiles so secret and knowing, laughing like a warbler robed in apple blossoms. *This one*, she thinks, as if something immensely important has just been settled, *this one is special.*

She lurks and lingers in the village, dallying for three days, then five, heedless of the dangers. There are those who can spot her kind, who could sniff out a Jackdaw and his ilk, and then sneak up by night, pitchforks at the ready, a murderous gleam in their frightened eyes. *Worse than tinkers*, say the old men, heads wagging over froths of ale. *Worse they are, those birdfolk. Thieves, every last one.* The women say much the same, though some turn away, shamed or wistful, recalling trysts best kept unspoken.

Cath knows she should move on, flee from her sudden (and surely unhealthy) addiction, but Khavy is the tune to her song, the words to her half-written life, and it matters not that he has family, it matters not that he has a happy little bed to call his own, it matters not that his sisters will weep over his absence as if the world were about to end, for she is only little Cath grown, Cath whose wide wings have never yet brought her the perfect certainties of hearth and home. She is Cath of the Loneliness, her only teachers a selfish scheming river and a man whose wings spent half their life in hiding.

She waits. Bides her time until the others are away in the fields and Khavy plays with the ducks and chickens in the yard, squelching mud through his toes. She takes a deep breath, the kind that breaks history into chapters, and approaches with a covetous heart and a necklace of pearls in her hand. She dangles the treasure before young Khavy, and he stops, delighted. Hypnotized.

"Do you like birds?" she asks, and then, as his smudge-face bobs a nodded yes, she leans down—so tall compared to him, almost gaunt, her eyes as cold as a marsh hawk's—and she murmurs, to herself, "Yes. You'll do nicely."

About the Author:

Mark Rigney is the author of the play *Acts of God* (Playscripts, Inc., 2008) and the nonfiction book *Deaf Side Story: Deaf Sharks, Hearing Jets and a Classic American Musical* (Gallaudet University Press, 2003). His short fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and appears in *The Best of the Bellevue Literary Review, Talebones,* and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet,* among many others. An upcoming trilogy is slated to begin in *Black Gate* in 2011. His website, with links to many of his original stories, stage plays, and the dreaded Anti-Blog, is www.markrigney.net.

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NO TALE FOR TROUBADOURS

By

Pauline J. Alama

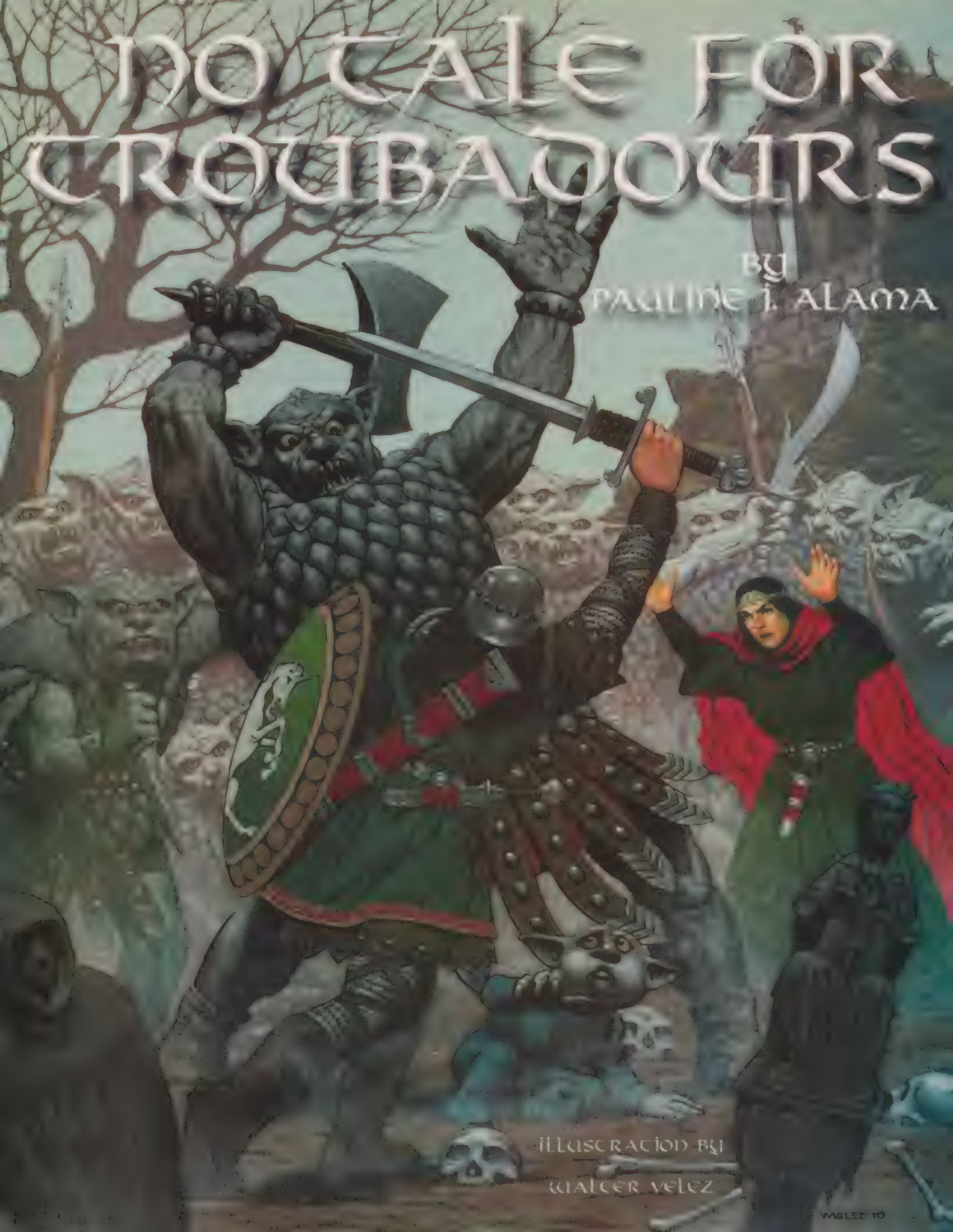

Illustration by

Walter Velez

When your reputation precedes you, it can be hard to outrun it.

The messenger favored me with the sort of worshipful gaze I'd thought was far in my past. I was not pleased to see him and his starry eyes. At my breast, Matilda sucked placidly, undisturbed by the stranger's entrance. I didn't bother to cover myself; if this sight embarrassed my visitor, he was welcome to leave. Isabel kept her eyes on her embroidery, too world-weary at ten to admit any interest in a stranger. But Trude and Robin stopped chasing each other and shrieking long enough to stare at our guest.

"Mama, who's that fuzzy-haired sheep?" Trude said. "Is he a messenger from Papa?"

"Trude! Mind your manners," I scolded her, though the man did look a bit sheeplike, with light curls around a mild face. He was obviously younger than I, and prettier than I'd been even when troubadours were still making songs about the golden hair streaming from my silver helm (though, in truth, my hair was sandy, my helm good, hard steel). Surely this angel-faced boy had no call to look on me so raptly—unless he wanted something.

"Sir," I said, "who are you, and why did my steward let you in? Surely you know Lord Stephen is away at war. What business can you have with me?""I—I am Gervase, parson of the village of Valabas, near the Hard Mountains."

"I know that country," I said. Hard indeed—poor, rocky land where little grew but tough grass fit for tough goats. My father, as one of his less amiable jokes, had given me a stretch of barren terrain in the mountains as a dowry.

Gervase said, "I was told I would have the honor of meeting the Maiden of Revie."

"No such maiden lives here." I avoided his eyes as I delivered this half-truth.

"No? But—but—," Gervase stammered. "Are you not Lady Ursula of Veronne, born Ursula of Revie?"

Reluctantly I confessed, "Just so. But I imagine you've noticed by now that I'm no maiden any more." As if to punctuate my declaration, Matilda abruptly left my breast and jumped down to toddle after her brother and sister.

My visitor blinked at me as I laced up my bodice, then resumed speaking. "Maiden or wife, you are renowned across seven kingdoms for your valor—rescuer of Prince Claude, scourge of the Northern Raiders, slayer of the Murderous Baron of Swansby, heroine of the Crusade—"

"Don't talk to me about the Crusade," I snapped. "If there's a devil in Hell, that was his work. *Robin! Trude! Put Tilda down this instant! Isabel, can't you watch them for a moment while I'm dealing with this messenger?* Excuse me, sir. What were you saying?"

"Good Maiden—Good Lady, I should say—we need your strong right arm and your brave heart to defend us from a host of foes."

"What do you imagine one aging swordswoman can do against an army?"

"I—I don't know, Lady, but such wonders are spoken of you! They say you have the perfect strength that flows from a pure heart."

"You *have* been listening to the troubadours, haven't you? Well, you can put their rhyming nonsense right out of your wooly head. In the so-called Holy Crusade, I waded in blood. Pure heart, indeed! Why should I take more men's deaths upon my soul—"

"These are not men but demons," the priest said.

"I've heard *that* before."

"Lady, I beg you! Our fighting men are gone; not only the lord and his sons, but the blacksmith and any plowmen fit for the infantry have gone to war."

That I could believe. These days, Loegris was a land of women, children, peasants, and priests. Since our King Henry of Loegris had fallen out with his cousin, King Henry of Albis, his vassals had been called to arms—among them my Stephen, a lamb in wolf's clothing, a man of peace honor-bound to wage war. I nodded. "So has my husband. Fortunately, no one thinks to call the lady of the manor to arms—except you, it seems."

"Where else can I turn?" said Gervase. "There are none in Valabas now but poor laboring people. We live in terror of unnatural creatures with fangs and claws to rend and kill. Not content to raid our sheepfolds, these fiends dig up the dead from our churchyard and leave a mess of splintered bones behind them, so mangled only God can ever sort out one body from another."

That caught my ear. "I have known fiends like that, fiends in human form, who desecrated the bodies of the fallen to heap misery and shame upon their foes. I wish I could say none of them had been on our side. I swore I'd never let anyone do that again."

"Then you'll help us?" said Gervase.

"I suppose I must," I sighed. Did he speak truth? Could I trust him? His threadbare elbows suggested a humble parson living close to the people he would have me defend—a world of difference from the smooth preacher who'd played upon my pity for distant strangers in Jerusalem.

"Valabas has a sort of claim on me, being near my dowry-land. But tell me truly, Gervase, were you being poetic when you spoke of fangs and claws?"

"That is no poetry, Lady, but stark truth. Our enemies are trolls of the mountains, taller than the tallest man, with sinews like iron and hides like stone. We've pelted them with stones and arrows, and we've never yet seen one bleed."

"I hope I won't fail you," I said solemnly. "In my youth, maybe, I would have laughed at the challenge. I'm not young any more."

"You will not fail us, Lady."

"To fight an uncanny monster, I'll need my old companion—if she'll come. If she can even be released from the Abbey of the Holy Name. If she consents to leave her cloister and take up sorcery again." I looked up sharply at the priest to see how he would take this request.

Gervase's shining eyes were undimmed. "She will come. Surely, God will send us aid in our darkest hour."

I set my household in order as quickly as I could, committing the estate to the care of the frail old steward, the steward to the care of the tough old housekeeper, the children to the care of Eloise, most trusted of serving-women.

Then came the moment I'd been delaying. With Eloise's discreet assistance, I went through the storeroom and dug out a heavy, dusty box—a coffin, the coffin of the Maiden of Revie. I forced stiff hinges open to reveal the wretched remains inside: my steel-plated brigandine, still bloodstained and, I feared, a bit rusty.

I knew it wouldn't fit quite the way it did before four childbirths. I expected it to be tight in the hips and belly. I didn't expect to be unable to get it past my breasts. Had I really been so slim, when I was the Maiden?

"Would my lady like me to—" Eloise began, then stopped, her normal calm pragmatism defeated. She couldn't take it out for me, like an old gown. And no amount of assistance would squeeze me into the metal-plated skin of my old self.

"Would you please help me out of this, Eloise dear?" I said with what dignity I could muster.

"Certainly, my lady," she said, unruffled, and liberated me from the trap of ill-fitting armor.

"I guess I've grown fat," I mumbled, shame-faced.

"So have we all. The manor has prospered since your husband came into his heritage," Eloise said placidly. "The land is well managed, the harvests are good, and there is plenty for all. You cut a good figure for a prosperous matron of your years."

"And an ill one for the maiden warrior Gervase hoped to find," I said ruefully. "Well, this armor can't help me now. At least the coif and helmet fit." I put them on to be certain. Their unaccustomed weight on my head was like the drag of old sins.

"I'm afraid I haven't sent your sword to be polished, my lady."

"I never asked you to, Eloise. In fact, if I'd asked you to do anything with it, it would have been to throw it in the lake, like King Arthur's sword. Ah, well, it's a good thing I postponed that rite." I tried on the sword-belt. Luckily it had been a long one. My shield looked fine, the painted unicorn still fresh in its green field—all that paint, no doubt, had kept it from rust. I shut the coffin lid on the unwearable armor, straightened, and drew the sword, amazed at how easily my hand took to it, as if it had always longed for the hilt, all these years of peace.

A voice behind me nearly startled me out of my helm. "Is that *all* your armor?" Isabel said skeptically.

"It's all I need," I said, sheathing the sword. "Swift action will be more important than armor in this battle. All that heavy steel would just slow me down."

"Let me come with you," she said.

"No."

"Were you much older than ten when you turned knight-errant?"

"Lots," I said, though it crossed my mind that in no time ten would become fourteen. I wondered whether I should drop that old armor in the river so she couldn't follow in my bloody footsteps. "Besides, I'm counting on you to hold this castle until I return. Be prepared to direct resistance in case of a siege."

Isabel nodded, somewhat but not entirely mollified. Dumping the armor in the river would do no good. Maybe I'd do better to tell her the whole truth about the Crusade. Someday. Not today.

Dressed and packed for my journey, I kissed the children goodbye, lingering regretfully with Tilda. I had postponed weaning her; now she'd be weaned the hard way, all at once. Hard for me, too, I expected, but no use lamenting. I'd fought with a broken arm—the left one, thank God—and I'd fought with a head wound bleeding into my eye; if I couldn't fight with sore breasts, I wasn't the Maiden of Revie. All right, I *wasn't* any sort of maiden, but never mind that; I would soldier on. "Be good, children. Don't tease Tilda, or I'll make you answer for it, however far I may be."

They all stared at me open-mouthed like baby birds expecting to be fed. "When will you be back?" said Robin forlornly.

"As soon as ever I can. I'll sort out this trouble in Valabas, never fear, and hurry home to you. You're the best children in the world." I could hardly speak past the lump in my throat. "Be kind to each other while I'm gone."

"We will," Isabel promised solemnly.

Trude's eyes darted mischievously at Robin, and she smirked in a way that boded no good.

Isabel noticed that smirk. "Behave, Trude!" She cuffed her sister—a light tap, but it started a four-way melee right then and there. So much for peace and loving-kindness. With a sigh, I turned away from one battle toward another.

Fortunately Gervase knew the way to the Abbey of the Holy Name, for I had never been there. When Isabeau the Wise retreated there after the Crusade, I thought she needed time alone, so I did not try to visit. By the time she sent word that she was taking vows, I was busy caring for a baby and a manor. After that, she sent no messages. I could only hope she was still there.

It was early spring, when you still

feel winter's teeth in the breeze, even in the sunshine. I tightened my hood around my ears, glad that I did not yet need to put on the metal coif, which would be icy in this weather. As we rode, clouds advanced across the sky, and a chilly drizzle leaked down. We arrived on the portico of the abbey bedraggled and miserable.

I knocked on the door and waited. A young nun in a black habit answered the door. "God give you good day, travelers. What brings you here?"

As Gervase sneezed, I spoke: "I'm looking for Isabeau the Wise. I was told she retired to this abbey."

The young nun still stood in the doorway, unsmiling and unyielding. "If she is here, then she has come to escape the blandishments of the world."

"Yes, well, fortunately, we didn't come with any blandishments," I retorted.

Gervase cut me off. "Good Sister, we come on an urgent mission of mercy. I am the Parson of Valabas, a village sore beset by hellish trolls. I have come with Lady Ursula, the Maiden of Revie, to implore her to help deliver my people."

His sweeter tones stopped the young nun's tirade as my anger could not. Still, she left us shivering on the doorstep while she sought an answer inside. It's all for nothing, I fretted as we waited. Surely Isabeau is long gone. She had always been mad to push on, seeking adventure, following her curiosity. What if she had left so long ago that no one could find her?

A few sneezes later, the young nun returned. "The Abbess will see you. Follow me."

She did not say Isabeau would see us, I noticed. She will take me to the Abbess, who will tell me Isabeau left years ago. But when the young nun bowed us into a cell, one of the two veiled women within raised her head, revealing a face as familiar as the palm of my hand: arched black brows, piercing blue eyes, straight nose, high cheekbones. I cried in relief, "Oh, Isabeau!"

She did not smile. "I left that name behind with the arts I once practiced. I am Sister Agony in the Garden, and my life is here. If you thought to win me away, Ursula, you're years late."

The joyful greeting died on my lips. This was Isabeau, all right: Isabeau at her most difficult, choleric, and outright mulish. Once, I could have broken her mood with a joke or the promise of a new adventure. Now I glared in silence.

"I see you still have a dreamy-looking troubadour traipsing along with you to sing your praises, just like in the old days," Isabeau commented.

"He's a *priest*," I said.

"Maybe," she said, "but he's got a troubadour's eyes. Every time he looks at you, I can practically hear him trying out quaint phrases to describe your—"

"Hush, Sister Agony," said the nun beside her. "Sister Ascension, you are dismissed. Good guests, sit with us, if you please. I am Mother Sermon on the Mount, the Abbess of this house. Anything you would discuss with Sister Agony in the Garden, you may discuss with me."

Discuss? I could hardly speak. To see Isabeau again—so unchanged, and yet so untouchable—was like cold steel in my heart. I hadn't realized how I'd longed to travel with her again, as we had so many times, so long ago. The longing stuck in my throat and silenced me.

Gervase, however, grew eloquent. "Thank you, Reverend Mother, for your hospitality. I know how trying it must be for you to admit a man to your chaste house. We will be as brief as we can. Good Sister Agony in the Garden, our case is desperate, and we beg your mercy. Valabas, where I am parson, is grieved by dire enemies, trolls from the mountains. I begged the Maiden of Revie to come help us; though she was loath to part with her children, she had compassion on us. But the enemy we face is unearthly, and she needs your wisdom allied with her strength. Will you, of your kindness, come to our rescue?"

Isabeau drew herself up very straight. "My heart weeps for your people, but you know not what you ask."

"Sister Agony," said the Abbess sternly, "once again your tongue outruns your sense of humility. Be not so quick to tell the parson what he knows or does not know."

"But he can't know, or he would refuse to come here! Ursula would have me take up the accursed Arts of Solomon again, to the harm of my soul!"

I snapped, "Accursed or not, you saved lives with your arts. Will you refuse to save any more for fear of mussing your nice clean soul? Who made *your* soul more precious than theirs?"

The Abbess gave me a look that would freeze fire. I took the hint and shut my mouth. Then she turned on Isabeau. "Your theology is ill-considered, my daughter. For all Solomon's sins, he was the Lord's anointed, and not accursed. His gifts were given for a purpose, as were yours. Did you think that, coming to this abbey, you left behind the temptation to misuse your gifts? I have seen you fall to new temptations: spiritual pride and a sort of overblown moral fastidiousness that easily turns to sloth."

"I have *not* been slothful! I keep the infirmary stocked with herbs—I labor at the lowest tasks for my penance—why, I rise before *anyone* in this abbey! And as for *pride*—"

The Abbess gave her a hell-freezing glare, and Isabeau shut up.

I wondered whether I could learn how to do that. It would be useful with the children.

When Mother Sermon on the Mount spoke again, it was in a calm, measured voice. "Sister Agony in the Garden, for your spiritual improvement in humility and active charity, I send you forth under the command of this priest—" The Abbess looked at me again—not the quelling glare, this time, but something like the look I might give a skein of floss when judging whether it was good enough for the altar-cloth I was embroidering. After a few moments, she smiled almost imperceptibly. "—and this lady. Obey Lady Ursula meekly, unless her commands conflict with those of the priest, until you learn true humility. Don't return to me till you do."

Isabeau's jaw tightened. "Yes,

Reverend Mother."

Though the blessed sun at last gave us some relief from the damp, it was a chilly ride to Valabas with Isabeau behind me in the saddle. For a long time she was silent; when I could bear it no longer, I began to babble. "I half expected to find you gone beyond recall, Isabeau."

"Sister Agony," she corrected.

"Ah, yes. Sister Agony. Who would have guessed it! I never thought you could bear to stay in one place for a whole season, let alone ten years."

She responded dryly, "It is humbling indeed to know that you thought me incapable of keeping my vow."

"That's not what I meant! Faith, you're the last person I'd have expected to take vows in the first place. I could see you as a solitary anchoress, alone with God in the wilderness. But not within cloister walls."

"Indeed, we have surprised each other in many things. I never would have guessed the Maiden of Revie would leave her sworn companion in the midst of a war to ride pillion behind a lesser knight—"

"Stephen is not a 'lesser knight,'" I said hotly. "He is a man of peace, wise in many things. When he lost all his brothers in one day's battle and turned home, half mad with grief, I went with him, fearing he might do something desperate. But I needn't have feared. All the way home he learned from the people we met and the lands we passed through: new ways of farming, of managing land, of ordering a village. He's made a better victory of our little manor than any crusader will ever make of Jerusalem. Everything he touches turns out better than it seemed to be. He even explored the barren land my father endowed me with, that everyone said was worthless, and found gold there! His men are digging a mine, using methods he learned along the way home from the Holy Land."

"So those wagon-loads of men and tools that passed through our village were yours?" Gervase said.

"Ours, yes—the mine must be fairly close to Valabas," I said. Then I found myself answering Gervase's questions about the mine, and about Stephen's improved crop-rotation patterns, and whether Valabas might benefit from a similar plan, while my once-inseparable companion fell silent behind me, closed up tight as an oyster.

She didn't speak to me again until we dismounted to refresh the horses and ourselves. I took some time to exercise with the sword; I didn't know whether to be pleased or frightened at how easily it came back to me.

"How swiftly you move!" Gervase marveled.

"Not up to your old speed," Isabeau said with unwelcome accuracy. "Are you sure you're ready?"

"Do you still have your old power?"

"I've got to be. If there were anyone else to send, I'd have sent them," I said. "Hopefully I've gained in wisdom what I've lost in speed. And you? Do you still have your old power?"

I didn't see the expression on her face, absorbed in my own practice; but I heard her voice falter. "I, ah, I haven't had occasion to find out."

Unlike Isabeau, I was not inclined to pick at that sore. Instead I sheathed my sword and uncovered the food I'd brought for us all.

Isabeau stared at my careful provisions in horror. "Cheese? During *Lent?*"

"What did you think, I had a pot of pease porridge in my saddle-bag?" I said crossly. "We had a dispensation for cheese during the Crusade. Why not now?"

"You used to be rather sarcastic about the dispensations offered for crusading," she reminded me.

"Not this one. It made sense then, and it makes more sense now. I can hardly fight monsters on bread alone." I set the loaf between her and Gervase; if they were inclined to be fastidious, they were perfectly welcome to it.

"Christ faced the Devil fasting," Isabeau said sternly.

"Well, good for Him. Not being divine, I have to go about things a bit differently. But maybe you don't share that limitation. Maybe you can multiply this loaf. Maybe the next time you and I make a disaster of our mission, you can raise all the dead back to life."

"Don't blaspheme," she said.

"I'm *not* blaspheming, Isabeau—"

"I'm not Isabeau any more. I'm Sister Agony in the Garden!"

"Oh, how could I forget? Sister *Agony.* Did you choose that name, or did you *earn* it?"

"It has *meaning,*" she said. "I thought you'd understand. Or didn't you see what I suffered, back there in the Holy Land?"

"We both went through agony," I said. "What I don't understand is how you could have such regard for what the Church tells you, after that lying monk led us all down the road to Hell."

"One monk isn't the whole Church. That's no reason to turn your back on God."

"I haven't," I said. "Only on the men who claim to speak in God's name. Present company excepted," I added belatedly.

"Never mind," Gervase said mildly. "Just what happened to you on Crusade to make you both so bitter?"

Sister Agony spoke first. "The last time I used my—the Arts of Solomon—I—I wrought too powerfully. A whole marketplace became one vast inferno. The very air burned, and as people inhaled it, they went up like firewood—Saracens and Crusaders together—men, women, and children—all but me and Ursula, who stood under my protection."

"Was that why you would never look at me afterward?" I said, "Because you wouldn't have done it, if I hadn't been there to protect? Because I was your 'occasion of sin'?"

Isabeau frowned. "It was you who wouldn't look at me. As if I'd become something diabolical. And I had."

"What had I become, myself, by

then?" I said. "I wasn't an innocent before the Crusade, but once, I could tell myself I only killed at need.

"That monk who preached the Crusade—he told us that if we didn't beat back the Saracens, Christians in the Kingdom of Jerusalem would be forced at sword-point to sacrifice their first-born children to demons. When we reached the Holy Land, we were the ones committing blood sacrifice. I wasn't a knight-errant any more, challenging killers to single combat; I was one drop in a tide that killed anyone in its way. When an army does evil, your only choices are to murder your conscience, or to betray your comrades. Damnation lies on either path." My mouth tasted bitter with the words that tumbled out. "I remember a sniper dealing death from a narrow window. She felled dozens of us, but our archers couldn't touch her. So we set our arrows alight and burned her house, and then," I swallowed bile, "then I saw the children she had been protecting leap from the upper-story windows to escape the flames.

"We were the ones sacrificing children, Sir Priest. I saw no demons among the Saracens worse than the ones I found in myself. When Sir Stephen left for home, I went with him—for his protection, I told myself, but really, I think I knew he was my only road out of Hell. He never forgot how to be kind, not even in the midst of the slaughter. He carries peace in him. Sometimes, by his side, I can even go to sleep without seeing those burning, falling children."

I did not look at Gervase, but I could feel his eyes on me. "I see. I thought you two could not forgive each other, but I was wrong. It's yourselves that you haven't forgiven." He began praying softly but audibly. I've knelt by enough deathbeds to recognize absolution when I hear it.

When he was done, I whispered, "Which of us was that for?"

"Whichever of you will accept it," he said. "And for whatever a poor parson's word is worth, I think you should eat for strength, Lady. We will need all your strength at Valabas."

When we reached our journey's end, the day was fast fading. "The trolls will come soon," said Gervase. "They attack by twilight."

"Where should we wait for them?" I said.

Gervase considered. "The shepherds have been guarding the pasture and paddock with fire. It's the graveyard that's less defended."

"Then lead us there."

The graveyard sprawled over a hillock and valley behind a modest stone church. We left our horses at a neighbor's stable; Gervase's poor old nag would be no use in battle, and my Greatheart, though bold enough against human foes, could not be trusted to hold his ground against anything unnatural.

"Will you bring holy water from the font to douse the fiends with?" Isabeau asked Gervase.

He ducked his head sheepishly. "If it pleases you, Sister. But I've never seen that it daunted them in any way."

"Ah." She was silent a while, pensive.

Meanwhile, I sought out a spot for an ambush. A thicket of brush offered partial shelter where we might hope to see before we were seen. I took up my post, then, and readied my weapons.

"A crossbow?" Isabeau said curiously. "You used to say they were unknightly."

"I used to believe everything old knights told me or troubadours sang. I used to be a fool. It's a slow weapon, I admit. But Gervase said arrows wouldn't pierce troll-hide. A crossbow bolt bites deeper. I keep them at Castle Veronne as siege weapons."

She nodded solemnly. "All right. You have your weapons in place; now it's my turn. I'll cast a Protection on you."

"Not this time. I can protect myself."

"Then why did you drag me along?" she snapped.

"I don't know—for the refined conversation?"

She didn't get her hand over her mouth quite fast enough: I caught her smirk. "Listen, you stubborn steelhead—"

"No. I won't be the only one shielded from the slaughter. Not again."

"Don't make me explain to Stephen how I let you go to your death."

"Don't torment yourself, Agony," I said. "I mean to make good use of you. Can you sharpen my senses? I've been riding all day, I'm tired, and I don't dare miss a single troll footstep."

She thought, then nodded. "I'll cast a Vigilance on your senses—and maybe on mine and Gervase's, too. Even with a Vigilance, three watchers are better than one." She drew a pouch from her cloak. "Gervase, I'll need a fire to warm the elements in this spell—taken from the Sanctuary lamp, if you can, to bless our endeavors—and your prayers that my work will not turn evil this time."

The priest bowed his head. "God guard you, body and soul, and bless the work of your art, Sister. I'll get the fire for your spell."

I watched Sister Agony in the Garden as she ground herbs in her hand-mortar, mixed them with oil, and set them over a little fire. She chanted over them, her hands perilously close to the flame, but I know it was not heat that made sweat run down her face like drops of blood. The name she had chosen for herself was apt. Again she tasted the agony of doubt: the fear that she did wrong, outweighed only by the fear of doing nothing. And again, she did so at my request. If she needed to hide herself in an abbey the rest of her life thereafter, I must let her pursue her peace. I had asked enough of her for a lifetime.

When her chant was done, she dug her thumbs into the mixture and anointed my eyelids, nose, lips, ears, and fingertips. Last she touched my forehead; with that, my senses sprang to new life. I could hear the heartbeats of my two companions, and the faster one of a crow perched in the thicket nearby. I could smell the slow waking of spring, the snow in the mountains, the ore in the rocks. Stranger still, I could understand what the sorceress did as she opened her own senses and those of Gervase. I could feel their readiness as I felt my own. And I felt the quaking of the soil as, somewhere

behind a yew bush, quick claws scrabbled at a frost-hardened grave.

I raised my crossbow. With my newly sharpened senses, I knew just where to aim, how to send the bolt between the branches and strike my unseen enemy. A wordless cry rose from the stricken troll—but its companion leapt over the yew to attack me.

Gervase had not lied. The granite-gray creature that sprang toward me bore the claws and teeth of a bear, though its eyes looked human, the same angry eyes I'd seen on Saracen and fellow Crusader. Too late to span my crossbow, I drew my sword and struck with all my might in the midst of its breast. The blade did not sink in. Still, the force of the blow drove the creature backward, gasping for breath. I struck again and again till the monster fled: not bleeding, but not invulnerable. Till then, it had only met frightened villagers, untrained in the arts of war; it did not know what to make of me.

"Drop it, you hell-hound!"

I did not have long to enjoy the victory. At the opposite edge of the graveyard, another monster despoiled a grave. I spanned my crossbow and moved toward the soft sound of digging. This fiend had worked quickly while I'd been busy with its comrades. Already it had a human thighbone in its mouth. With a hideous crunch, it bit through the bone to suck the marrow.

"Drop it, you hell-hound!" I shouted as I loosed my bolt. I hit it right where its heart should be, if it had one. It did not sink in, but it hit with a resounding smack.

The monster retreated, bruised if not bleeding. But this time, I thought I heard words in its cry: "Heartless fiend!"

I ran from one grave to another, surprising the trolls as they dug. Crossbow-bolts troubled them most, but it takes time to span the bow; often I was forced into hand-to-hand fighting, which was not to my advantage. The trolls had claws, fangs, and, in their tough skin, a sort of armor; I had none of these. My sword would not bite, even when I could reach to strike them. But sometimes I won by sheer speed: Isabeau's spell had quickened my senses, and the trolls' movements were slow and heavy, as if weighed down by battle armor.

Not until I hacked off a scale did I realize that what I had taken for troll-hide was, in fact, armor, or at least protective clothing of enviable quality. It looked as rough and gray as the troll's skin, but the beast did not flinch when I broke it, and by then I knew my opponent too well to think him simply impervious to pain. This was not a beast fighting in his bare skin, but a cunning creature who had fashioned a covering for himself. I faced the trolls with new respect and new fear.

I lunged at the gap I'd made in the armor; this time, my sword bit flesh—not soft like human flesh, but less hard than the outer covering. Roaring, the troll tore at my sword-arm and shoulder with claws like daggers. Now I missed my brigandine indeed.

I slammed my shield into his face and kicked as high as I could reach. As soon as his claws released me, I wrenched my sword from his thigh and retreated a few paces, stanching the claw-wounds on my arm as well as I could with my cloak. What was on my sword was not like blood, but thicker, muddy. I could see nothing flowing from the troll's thigh-wound, but he limped painfully backward away from me.

Another troll came running, and I braced for the attack; but this one only wrapped his arms around the wounded one, slung him over one shoulder, and carried him away. Yet another circled Isabeau warily, from time to time dodging the hot sparks she sent flying from her mortar.

Gervase defended another grave with a slingshot—valiant enough, but God knows he was no David to these Goliaths. I rushed headlong at a troll that menaced him. In my mind, I could hear Isabeau commenting wryly that my hard head was deadlier than my sword. That at least gave me something to laugh about as my wounded shoulder resounded with the shock of impact. Nonetheless, I accomplished my goal: I knocked the troll down where I could slash at his unprotected face. They had armor, but no visors. Thick, sludgy troll blood oozed from the wounded muzzle. I thrust through his mouth, and the troll lay still.

Bile rose to my throat; I forced it down. *This is not a man,* I told myself. *That was not a sin.* Nonetheless, I felt I would give my right arm to be out of that battle, at home, at peace, with Stephen by my side and my children around me. I belonged to life now, not death. I wanted no more of this.

Isabeau screamed when the next troll raced toward me. I saw a belt of sparks rise from her mortar as she cast a hurried protection, but such spells are chancy things without proper preparation. I was not entirely surprised when the shining belt encircled the troll instead of me. Sister Agony shouted a word entirely ill-suited to the cloister—or perhaps it was a spell-breaker, because the belt of light dissolved. I faced the troll, uncertain whether to slash at his impervious armor or grapple with his powerful arms. But he did not attack me: he simply hefted the body of his fallen comrade and ran.

I could have caught him easily, for the Vigilance sped my nerves, while his burden slowed him down. But I let him go. Good warriors don't leave the fallen to the enemy's mercies, nor do chivalrous knights hold dead enemies hostage.

All around, I saw trolls retreating. I was half inclined to let them go, till I saw Gervase sprint off, shouting, after a troll who was making away with a human corpse.

What would he do if he caught the troll? Pray at him? I followed as fast as I could; Isabeau came on my heels.

The mountain troll, of course, made for the slopes; as running became climbing, our advantage of speed vanished. At times it was all we could do to keep the troll in sight.

"I don't understand them," I muttered as we climbed.

Gervase, panting and laboring on

the steep rise, cast a weary glance at me. "What is there to understand?"

"Why do they attack the churchyard at all? They don't act like those fiends who cut up the bodies of the dead and display them to horrify the living. They simply take them as a thief takes a coin. Why?"

Gervase grimaced. "To defile a sacred place—the devils!"

"But they don't act like devils," I argued. "They forfeit chances to attack us so they can rescue their wounded. They act like a good army, loyal and honorable."

"Is it honorable to take the bodies of my neighbors from consecrated ground?"

"That's the one thing that doesn't fit," I admitted. "I wish I could understand them!"

"I'd rather we could catch up with them," Gervase said.

Isabeau, to my surprise, took my side. "You have to understand your enemies. Otherwise, they keep doing things you don't expect. And even you must admit they don't flee from the Name of God. They can't be bound as one binds a spirit. Ursula is right: they're not devils."

"I can't believe my ears. Did you say I was right about something? Ow!" My wounded arm throbbed as I grabbed a rock to clamber higher.

"Be still and let me tend your wounds," she said.

"Where's your promised obedience, Sister Agony?"

As I expected, this consideration swayed her not at all. She seized my arm.

"Ow! Let go." I pulled away, slipped on an icy patch, then recovered, and resumed climbing.

"You won't be much use in battle if you bleed to death on the way up."

"Or you, if you spend yourself too soon. How many spells have you worked today—after all those years out of practice? Remember how you swooned at the Battle of Feorgard?"

"How can I forget, when you never cease to remind me?" she growled. "But I needn't use magic now. Just let me clean your wounds."

"There's no time," I said, for the trolls sped ahead of us. Isabeau climbed nimbly enough, but I was sweating from the effort of hauling my fat body up the rocks, and spindly Gervase looked exhausted.

"But you have a chest wound!" Isabeau wailed.

"Eh?" I looked down at the damp spot near my breast. "No, no. That's just milk."

"Milk? Really? Don't you use a wet-nurse?"

"Wet-nurses are for cowards," I said, though the jostling of my full breasts as I climbed certainly added to my misery, and I was starting to wonder whether I'd be in any condition to fight the trolls when and if we caught up to them.

"I wish you'd told me sooner," Isabeau said. "I know some fascinating spells that call for mother's milk."

"Then you shouldn't have shut yourself in an abbey," I said. "You should have come home with me and Stephen. If you wanted to avoid the blandishments of the world, I'm sure we could have found you a nice cave to be a hermit in."

"Those claw-wounds should never have happened. Where's your armor?"

"I'd hate to be climbing these rocks in a load of armor," I said. Then, "Why Isabeau, I might think you cared about my safety."

She shot me a hurt look. "I always cared. *You're* the one who left *me,* you know."

"What do you mean? I *begged* you to come with us. You wouldn't leave the war."

"With you and Stephen casting honeyed glances at each other, do you think I believed for a moment that you wanted me?"

"What, I can't have a husband and a friend at once? Of all the foolish things—"

"Ssh!" Gervase hissed.

We stifled our argument and listened. Ahead and above us, we'd become used to the scrabbling sound of the troll climbing. Now we heard footsteps—walking, not climbing—and more than one pair of feet.

Isabeau drew a cord from her cloak and began twisting it, knotting it, muttering over it. I recognized the ritual: someone was going to trip and fall. God grant it would not be me this time: it's hard to direct a spell in a hand-to-hand fight. More carefully than ever, I scaled the remaining height of the ridge and vaulted the last rock to emerge on a small plateau.

The troll with the corpse over his shoulder wheeled around to look at me. "Foul fiend!" he shouted.

Beyond him, two trolls emerged from a cave in the mountainside. I drew my sword.

"No!" shouted my adversary as another, much smaller troll ran pell-mell from the shelter of the cave, tripped, and tumbled over the ridge where my companions were hiding. The big troll, lunging to protect the little one, slipped and fell face-down on the icy rock.

"It's a child, a child!" I cried. I sheathed my sword and sped after the hapless youngster.

The claws that clung to the ledge were sturdy, made for climbing crags. But thanks to Isabeau's spell, the little one had gotten himself—or herself?—dangling precariously with no ledge for the feet. I backed down the slope, setting myself between the trollkin and my friends. "Isabeau, it's just a child," I said.

"OUR BELOVED DEAD ARE NOT FOOD."

Bless her, she understood. I did not see what she did, too intent on the child myself to look behind me, but I felt an invisible mantle of protection wrap around us both, me and the trollkin together. Trusting to her protection, I took my hand off the rock-face to steady the child.

The little one flinched away from me violently, and would have fallen but for Sister Agony's spell. Gently but forcefully, I guided two small clawed feet to ridges and helped the little troll climb back to the waiting parents.

My adversary put down the corpse she carried—yes, *she.* How had I failed to notice? She clasped the child to her bosom for a long moment.

Finally, she spoke to me. "I know not how to greet you, warrior of the Mud People. Are you my mortal enemy, or my daughter's foster-mother? Why slay my neighbors, then save my daughter?"

"I want no war with children," I said. "But your neighbors made war on my people first."

"We craved no war with the Mud People till they sought to slay us as we gathered food."

Gervase joined me on the rise. "Our beloved dead are not food."

The troll drew her brows down. "You Mud People abandon your dead for mute worms to eat, but begrudge them to speaking people, bearers of souls? You kill living lambs for your food, but begrudge us the ones that die by mischance?"

I was too revolted to answer. But Isabeau, true to form, was curious. "Carrion eaters—like crows or bears—I see! And endowed with souls? Do you know who formed your soul, Troll of the Mountains?"

The troll bowed her head. "The One Maker, Shaper of the World, who molded your people of mud, shaped my ancestors out of rock and placed them in a fruitful grove. But they were exiled for their sins, and since that downfall, each spring we must eat the food of death until life blooms anew. When fruits abound, we give up carrion and rejoice."

Isabeau turned to Gervase. "Surely these are not devils, but creatures of God like us, susceptible to both sin and grace. Surely we can parley with them for peace."

It was a strange peace conference. The little troll, seated between me and her mother, kept stealing frightened glances at me, then huddling closer to her mother's side. On my other side sat Sister Agony. Gervase sat reassuringly by the Elders of Valabas, who looked positively green with terror. All around us were trolls, great and small. The largest of them stood on a high rock before us. "I, Hrething, Queen of the Stone People of the Mountain, welcome the Mud People of the Vale under my protection to speak peace, by the bond of Ursula, warrior of the Mud People, now foster-mother to Gif, daughter of Edyif of the Stone People."

"Foster-*mother?*" I sputtered.

"Whoever saves a child's life becomes another parent to that child," the Queen said. "You were our mortal foe till then. Now we must seek peace, or dishonor that bond."

"We seek peace, too," said the Chief Elder of Valabas, his voice shaking, "but not at the price of our dead."

"The eating of our dead is loathsome to the Mud People," Isabeau explained. "Is there not enough carrion in your own lands? In these Hard Mountains, surely, many things die during the winter. You tell me that you eat carrion every spring. But you never needed to assail Valabas till this year."

"It is too early," said the Troll-Queen. "So cold, so barren. The winter dead are still frozen in the heights. We should be asleep now, dreaming the Great Dreams of Wisdom and Foreknowledge, but for the devilish noise and clamor that woke us before our time."

"What noise and clamor?" Isabeau asked.

The troll shuddered. "Mud Men have come to tear out the mountain's heart with tools of iron."

I put a hand to my head. "My gold mine!"

Everyone stared at me. "My father gave me a stretch of hill-country hereabouts—barren, dry, no one's ever tried to live on it. But there is a vein of gold in the ground. My husband's men have begun digging a mine."

"That must stop," the Troll-Queen said. "Without the Great Dreams, our children grow sickly and fretful, and we all grow hungry too early in the year, needing more carrion than these hills provide. Let us sleep as the Maker intended. Leave us in peace, and we will leave you in peace."

And so the peace treaty was concluded, at less cost than any I had yet encountered. I would be sorry to tell Stephen the gold mine had failed—he'd been so proud of finding value in even the most worthless things I brought to the marriage—but that would be a small regret, if only I could see him home safe from the war with as little hurt as I'd taken in my return to knight-errantry.

After the parley was done, Isabeau remained deep in talk with the trolls. "Come on, Is—um—Sister Agony," I said. "You must be anxious to get back to your abbey. As for me, I have to hurry to my husband's miners and tell them to stop. And then find some work for them around the manor, so they won't turn brigands on the road. My work is far from done."

"I'm not going back to the abbey," she said. "I've agreed to stay with the trolls for a season as surety of your promise. And besides, I want to stay. I want to learn from their Great Dreams of Wisdom and Foreknowledge." Her eyes shone with wonder, curious, eager, like in the old days, when a new path unfolded at her feet and she could not wait to see where it led. "I want to dream with them, withdrawn in the dark till Easter flowers forth—a truer Lenten fast than the one in the abbey. I will teach them, in return, our own prayers and sacred scriptures."

"This one has the heart of a troll," the one she'd been speaking to said approvingly. "We have much to teach each other."

"But—but—Sister Agony—Isabeau, will I ever see you again?"

"Come back here in the summer. By then, I may have found—how did you put it?—a nice cave as a hermitage."

I wrapped my arms firmly around her, disarranging the poultice she'd tied so carefully around my sword-arm. "You'd better be here. I'll miss you. How I've missed you!"

"And I you. But take heart: we did gain some wisdom for the strength we lost with age. You did well, Maiden of Revie," she said. Disengaging my embrace, she shoved the poultice back into place, irritating the wound it covered.

"You did well, too, Isabeau the Wise. Or Agony, if you prefer."

"Wasn't I always a bit of an Agony?" She clasped me very hard, then released me. I felt the pressure of her fingers all the way down the mountain.

"What will we tell the Abbess?" I fretted to Gervase as we set off with my husband's miners as escort.

"Tell her Sister Agony is preaching the Good News of Christ to the mountain trolls," Gervase said. "In truth, I'm not sure her abbess expected her back."

"Now that you've taken part in one of our adventures, what do you think of those troubadours' songs?"

Gervase took on that misty-eyed look again. "They fell short of the truth, Lady. They said you were beautiful, brave, and good—but they never told me you were wise as well."

"You're incurable," I said. "At least no troubadour will be singing of this latest victory. When has peacemaking ever made ballads?"

"Perhaps it's high time it did," said Gervase. He hummed to himself all the way down the road, no doubt composing in his head. How long before a highly colored song of the adventure found its way to Veronne? I hastened home to tell my daughter Isabel what really happened, before minstrels turned all the blood and sweat and folly to poetry.

About the Author:

Pauline J. Alama is a grant proposal writer and lapsed medieval scholar. Her first novel, *The Eye of Night* (Bantam Spectra, 2002), was a finalist for the Compton Crook Award; she is seeking a publisher for a second epic fantasy novel, *The Ghost-Bearers*. Her short stories have appeared in *Abyss & Apex* and numerous anthologies, including three volumes of *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Sword and Sorceress*. Unlike Lady Ursula, she has only one child and no combat experience, unless you count junior high school. For a full list of publications, see sites.google.com/site/paulinejalama/

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The Time of His Life

By Scott William Carter

Illustration by
Tomislav Tikulin

It's so difficult to find time for yourself amid the demands of family and work. Wouldn't it be great if you could just carve some out? Maybe, maybe not.

They actually bought the little house in September, right after they'd welcomed Jared into the world, but it wasn't until the day after Christmas that Tim found the hidden room.

Life had been so nuts back then that he'd barely gotten all their crap from the apartment moved, much less put everything it its proper place. Not that life had gotten any less nuts now. That was the new reality Tim was slowly coming to accept. Whatever remained of his peace of mind—and any private time to himself—vanished the moment he heard his second child's piercing wail echoing off those tiled delivery room walls of Rexton Memorial Hospital.

Case in point: Half the junk they'd brought with them was still buried in cardboard boxes, either in the one-car garage or up in his studio. Between changing diapers, warming bottles of formula, and waking up at God-knows-when-early to rock Jared back to sleep, they kept telling themselves they'd go through the rest of it, but what actually happened was that they only went digging when Maggie wanted something.

"Did you hear me, honey?" she said.

He blinked up at her, from his place on the carpet with Alexa. They'd been playing ponies—or at least, she had. He'd drifted off at some point when the ponies were having a picnic in the new barn they'd bought her for Christmas, daydreaming about that new strip he'd doodled a few weeks back. He'd planned to work on it over the break, before school reared up again, but of course that hadn't happened.

"Hmm?" he said.

From her perch on the couch, Maggie gave him the look, the one that made him feel like he was being a jerk, a certain tilt of the head and arching of the eyebrows. Even with the glare of sunset behind her, piercing through the spindly branches of the pin oaks, he could still tell she was giving him the look. She adjusted Jared, raising the bottle a little higher. The last dying notes of Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" faded to nothing. The CD changer shuffled to another song.

"Those two sconces," she said. "Could you go find them?"

"The what?"

"The sconces. You know, the ones we had in our bedroom?" When he continued to stare blankly, she added with a sigh, "The two silver things I put candles in that were over our bed?"

"Oh, those," he said.

"Oh, those," she said. "I think they ended up in that big Sony box."

"I have no idea where that is."

There was the look again. Any more protesting from him and she'd play her trump card, the whole I Bore Your Children routine.

Feeling weary, he kissed his daughter on her blonde head, and trudged out to the garage. Frost ringed the paned window that looked out on the backyard. The cold, brittle air smelled faintly of the gasoline for the lawn mower. Rickety wooden steps led both down to the concrete floor, and up, to his studio. He checked his watch—Maggie's present to him, not real gold of course, but still nice. He wanted to make it quick, but he knew he needed to give this at least five minutes.

The frigid concrete curled his toes. The boxes in the garage were stacked high and deep. In his search, he pushed aside bikes, studded tires, and a rusted barbecue, but he didn't see the Sony box.

Upstairs, then. The room—and he was being generous calling it a room—was technically nine by twelve, but the sloping ceilings on either side made it feel much smaller. Since it wasn't connected to the house's heat, the room was as cold as the garage. There were two paned windows, but the overgrown laurel bush outside squeezed off most of the light.

Still, it was his room. His studio. That's what they had agreed before they'd called the broker to make an offer. Sandwiched in among all the boxes were his drawing easel, his crane light, and his metal desk. The strip he'd been working on—about a bunch of animals living by a creek, inspired by the neighborhood park—was taped to the easel. In the crimson light, he saw that a layer of dust had formed on the paper. The dust of disuse.

No time for self-pity. He didn't bother turning on the space heater. It took him only a minute to search the boxes in the room, but then he remembered the closets. There were two of them, one on each side, the doors barely four feet high because of the low ceiling.

He tried the first. There was no light, only what filtered in, and he

waded through a sea of boxes in the near-darkness. No Sony box. In the second closet, he stumbled past an old Hoover, a metal sled, a kite choked by string, not one but two blenders, a bean bag chair Maggie told him he couldn't have in the house—ending up at a wall of boxes along the far wall.

It was very nearly pitch-black, but he saw no Sony box. He was about to turn around when he noticed that the boxes weren't pushed all the way against the wall. There was a gap maybe a few inches wide.

He pushed on the boxes, but they didn't budge. Something was back there, wedged between the exposed studs and the boxes. If it turned out it was the sconces, and he didn't check, Maggie would never let him hear the end of it.

The boxes were wedged in pretty tight, so it took some doing to move them. The space was so dark he could barely see his own hands. He felt along the floor near the wall and was surprised when the floorboards near the studs were ice cold.

Now that was odd. A pipe right under the floor, maybe? That's when his eyes finally began to adjust, and he saw the silver gleam of something jutting from the wall. It was the size of a small apple in the middle of the unfinished plywood.

A doorknob?

Impossible. Unless his sense of direction had completely failed him, this was the exterior wall. He reached out and took hold of it—and a sizzling, burning cold shot through his arm.

He let go with a yelp. Now he was mad. Something like this should never have passed inspection. Was it a joke, or was there really a door that opened into the laurel bush?

He had to know. He rubbed his hands together, warming them, and then grabbed the knob.

The metal was so cold that it scorched his hand, but with a noisy rattle it turned to the right. There was an even louder creak and then a puff of frigid air. The shadows of the wall deepened, the hints of boards and beams melting to black. Palms outward, he reached with his hand, and his hand went deeper, still deeper, his elbow now where the wall should have been.

Tim felt the first pangs of fear.

Part of him wanted to venture farther inside, but caution held him back. He wished he'd brought a flashlight. He touched the floor inside the opening—plain, rough floorboards, no colder than the ones beneath his feet. It was definitely a room. A hidden room.

He also had the feeling he wasn't alone.

The door creaked. He felt a rush of air—a stale, putrid odor, like the last breath of a dying man. He jerked his hand back just as the door slammed with a dull thud.

He scrambled downstairs. His heart was still pounding, and sweat trickled down his back. Maggie was now on the floor playing ponies with Alexa. Jared sprawled on a blue blanket, fixated on the rattle in his chubby fingers.

"You'll never guess what I found," Tim said.

Maggie looked up. "Did you find the sconces?"

"What? No. But I—"

"Darn it, Tim. Did you really look for them?"

"Maggie, I looked."

"Sometimes you don't look very hard."

"I looked! I looked!"

"All right, you don't have to yell. I'll look myself later."

He tensed. Translation: They're out there, but you were just too incompetent to find them. The thing was, she was probably right. But he didn't want to fight. He wanted to tell her about the room. He crouched next to her.

"Maggie, you won't believe—"

"Man, you stink," she said. "What were you doing up there? And what happened to your watch?"

"You'll never guess what I found."

"Huh?"

"Look at it. We're going to have to take it back."

He looked at it. Sure enough, moisture from the cold had formed under the crystal, and the hands were frozen. Five, ten minutes ago maybe, they'd stopped.

That was when Tim decided, rightly or wrongly, that he wouldn't tell Maggie about the hidden room—at least not yet. There was still some part of him that suspected, irrational as it was, that if he shared his discovery with her that it might not exist anymore. They'd trudge up there and it would be gone. Or if not gone, then ordinary. Explainable. His broken watch would have been a coincidence, nothing more.

This was the same feeling he'd gotten as a boy when he'd spotted what appeared to be the end of a rainbow in the cherry orchard behind his house, and when he'd dashed inside to retrieve a backpack for the gold, his ever-serious father had sat him down and made him suffer through a lecture on optical illusions. By the time he'd snuck back to the orchard, the rainbow had been gone.

So he waited. He waited while Maggie found the sconces in a

box in the garage, raising them triumphantly upon her return. He waited through spaghetti and meatballs, Alexa in the tub, Dr. Seuss, lights out, and Maggie trudging off to bed with a yawn. He was usually the last one up anyway, letting his exhausted mind turn to putty while watching basketball or some stupid sitcom—and feeling guilty because, exhausted or not, he could have been be up in his office working on the new strip.

But this time he wasn't tired at all.

When he stopped to retrieve a flashlight from the kitchen, the digital clock on the microwave showed it was 10:05. He noted the time because if he was up past midnight, Maggie might come looking.

Climbing the stairs, he felt like he did as a kid when he'd snuck out of his room on Christmas Eve to sneak a peek at his gifts. The temperature in his office had dropped to near-freezing; he felt the cold hardwood through the thin soles of his slippers. He flicked on not only the overhead light, but the light attached to his easel as well, turning the lamp to face the closet door.

The little flashlight was not as strong as he remembered, but it was a far cry better than bumbling in darkness. When he got past the boxes, and shined the light on the back wall, he saw the doorknob at once—a dull scratched silver, the kind of simple knob usually found on a closet door.

It didn't make sense. He swept his flashlight over the entire area and saw them—hinges. They were the same silver color as the knob, deeply recessed and attached to the studs. Peering closer, he finally saw the door. The perimeter was hard to see because of the way the lines blended into the patterns of the pressboard.

An optical illusion. Like the end of a rainbow.

Had the previous owner put it in? The house had been vacant for a year, the property slouching through probate after the old widower who'd lived there passed, and Tim didn't get the sense that the grandson had spent much time in it.

Tim realized he was stalling. Gritting his teeth, he grabbed the knob and twisted. The chill seeped into his skin like arctic water and he let go the moment he shoved the door. The opening was utterly dark, as if the air itself had been painted black, yet when he aimed his flashlight inside he was surprised at how easily the light penetrated.

The unfinished floorboards extended to untextured drywall not more than six feet away. He pointed the light to the right and saw gray metal shelving, packed with slim leather volumes in various shades of brown and red.

Crouching under the doorframe, Tim stepped inside. Something cold and slender like a wet strand of hair brushed his cheek. He yelped and jumped back, jerking his light up. When he saw that the object of his dread was a metal chain attached to an exposed bulb, he let out a strangled laugh. The ceiling was low, perhaps not even seven feet, made of the same unfinished drywall.

He gave the chain a yank and was pleasantly surprised when the light came on, emitting a low buzz. Now he saw the room in all its glory, a cramped space with no windows. The first thing he laid eyes on was the metal desk, up against the wall to his left. A green felt swivel chair, yellow stuffing protruding from a tear along the bottom, was parked in front of it. Except for a brown banker's lamp, there was only one other thing on top of the desk. A book.

Not a book like the slender volumes on the shelves, however. It was also brown leather, but it was both thicker and smaller, with gilded silver edges. The whole room couldn't have been more than eight feet by eight feet, so a single step took him to the desk. One glance was all it took to know what the book was—the title embossed in huge gold lettering on the cover:

The Holy Bible.

He found no writing inside, no name or inscription. The thin parchment felt wrinkled and well-used—not at all like the one bible he owned, a gift from his Baptist grandmother, which still crackled the few times it was opened. Inside the desk, he found a half-dozen magnifying glasses and two pairs of reading glasses. That was it. The rest of the drawers were just empty.

When he checked the leather volumes on the shelves, he saw at once the purpose of the magnifying glasses. The books were filled with stamps, nicely preserved in Mylar sleeves, of every size and denomination. Marveling at the number of volumes, he guessed there must have been nearly a million stamps.

He was standing there, inspecting an orange Cuban stamp that pictured Fidel Castro, when he was suddenly struck with the feeling that he was not alone. A chill ran up his spine. He glanced back at the door, but no one was

One glance was all it took to know what the book was...

there.

The feeling passed, and he shrugged it off as the understandable jumpiness of finding something so strange. He knew he'd been gone long enough that Maggie might come looking for him, so he decided to leave. The doorknob had a lock on the inside, the simple push-button kind, and he made sure it was unlocked.

Returning to the kitchen, he braced his hands on the countertop. His heart was only now starting to slow. His shirt was soaked with sweat, and he blinked several times to clear the sticky sheen over his eyes.

That's when he saw the time: 10:07.

According to the clock, only two minutes had passed since he'd gone upstairs.

At first, Tim didn't believe it. Despite other clocks in the house confirming that was indeed the time, it took him a couple more experiments before he was convinced of what he suspected in that first moment—that time had stopped while he was in the hidden room.

He agonized waiting until the following night, but there were no good opportunities before then. He waited until the kids were in bed, when he and Maggie were watching some stupid reality show, then told her he wanted to look for some old Beetle Bailey books he thought were in one of the closets upstairs. He checked the time before he went up—8:47.

The room was just as he'd left it. He stayed for ten minutes, leaving the door open so he could hear Maggie coming. He'd brought a little digital clock, a cheap plastic thing he'd gotten when they'd subscribed to Time magazine a few years back, and he watched the minutes pass.

The clock didn't stop inside the room, which worried him, but as soon as he stepped back into the closet the screen went dead. He clicked some of the buttons and jiggled it, but it was gone. Heading downstairs, he had to consciously avoid running. Easy now.

Before he even got a look at the kitchen clock, Maggie's first words told him everything he needed to know.

"Wow," she said, "that was fast."

It did not take Tim long to realize the implications. While there might have been people in the world who would have called 60 Minutes, Tim did not think this way. Instead, he realized what it meant for him personally—that he now had all the time in the world to do the one thing he loved most.

He had to wait until the following weekend before he had a block of time big enough to get the room situated. When Maggie took the children to her parents' for Sunday brunch, he begged off, complaining of an upset stomach. Then he dashed to the local art store and picked up a new easel and adjustable lamp—paying with cash from when he'd sold some graphic novels to the used bookstore a few weeks earlier. Maggie might not notice missing art supplies, but she would have certainly noticed the disappearance of the easel and the lamp.

Retrieving his toolkit from the garage, he set to work on the easel. Tim left the door open, still not quite trusting the room's special properties. But he got the easel constructed without interruption. He plugged the lamp in a spare outlet behind the desk. He wondered briefly about the electricity, where it was coming from, then decided to shrug it off. When you received a gift, sometimes it was better not to know where it was bought.

The room finally arranged to his satisfaction, he set to work finishing the panels. When Maggie still hadn't returned, he drew four more. Without a clock this time, he had no idea how much time passed, but eventually his bladder needed relief, so he headed downstairs.

Not more than fifteen minutes had passed since he'd gone upstairs.

That's when he knew he was about to have the time of his life.

That's when he knew he was about to have the time of his life.

The next three weeks were pure bliss. The drawing pads filled by the dozens. Soon the walls were decorated with his creations—not just in pen and ink, either, but in bright oils too. At first, he thought he'd bring a clock, to track how long he worked, but then he realized how pointless that was. Why would he need to track the time in a room where time did not pass?

Instead he simply worked until he didn't feel like working. Not only did he accomplish a great deal, he was always there for his family. Alexa needed a story read to her? No problem. His turn to make dinner? Sure, he'd make it every night of the week. Changing Jared's diapers? Bring it on. He had his hidden room now, and it made him want to work harder at being the model husband and father.

Of course, there were some problems, but they were all surmountable. His beard didn't

stop growing because he was in the room. Maggie noted it one day, telling him he'd better buy a new razor because she'd seen him shaving that morning. So he took his electric razor upstairs, shaving before he left the room. His sleeping rhythms soon got out of sync so he dragged a cot and some blankets upstairs and built in some nap time. He brought snacks and water bottles so he wouldn't have to stop to eat. The bathroom breaks were the toughest. He actually thought about bringing up a little portable potty, but he just couldn't bring himself to do it. Better to slip downstairs occasionally.

He indulged in his sojourns at every opportunity. In-laws over for dinner, the father-in-law getting a bit obnoxious with his Republican monologues? Tim suddenly announced he'd left the lamp on in his office and that he'd back in a minute. And he was—a five-hour minute. The vice principal breathing down his neck? Tim came home for lunch—Maggie was always happy to see him—and also took some time for himself upstairs. Sometimes it was days before he returned to work.

There was always time.

There was time for everything.

It wasn't until the end of that third week that he got that feeling again he wasn't alone. He was putting some finishing touches on three-dozen Cold Creek Gang strips, ones he was readying to submit to one of the syndicates. He paused to admire his work—he really was getting better, no doubt about it—when the air grew heavy.

All at once he felt edgy. Loneliness gnawed at him, a desperate sadness. He was absolutely sure that he was being watched, that there was somebody right behind him. Slowly, he lowered the pen, waiting for some telltale sign of an intruder—a whisper of breath, a scratch of clothes, something. The person was right there. He sensed it. They were going to get him.

He spun around in his chair.

No one was there. The door was closed, just as he'd left it, but it was unlocked. In fact, he hadn't been locking it at all, and he realized what a mistake that had been. Not because of a possible intruder but because of Maggie. What if she wandered up here?

His mouth dry, his skin cold and clammy, he crept to the door. There was still this feeling that somebody was out there, somebody with a terrible need to get inside. When he was close enough, he punched in the lock. It made a loud click, like the sound of a gun being cocked. It was only then that he realized he'd been holding his breath, and he let out a long, shuddering sigh.

That's when the door rattled.

He very nearly jumped out of his slippers. He was close enough that he not only heard it, but saw it—the jiggle of the knob, the slight slippage of the entire mechanism, loose in its socket. Every muscle in Tim's body turned to ice.

The rattle lasted only a second, and Tim thought maybe that was it, maybe the person had given up and gone away. Then the knob rattled again, much harder this time, a violent shaking that threatened to rip the whole door off its hinges—and it went on and on, growing stronger, a swelling hurricane of violence.

"Hey!" Tim cried.

The rattle stopped. Tim felt his pounding heart in every square inch of his body—on his tongue, behind his eyelids, even under his fingernails.

"Who's there?" he said. "Maggie, is that you?"

No answer. He had an awful foreboding that the person/thing/creature/whatever on the other side was about to burst down the door. The seconds passed. He remained frozen. The doorknob didn't rattle.

"Go away," he said, his voice shaking. "This is my room."

Finally, the feeling passed, and it was as if someone loosened a vise gripping his skull. But another feeling took its place. It was the feeling that things had changed—either the room, or him, he wasn't sure.

Things would be different. He didn't know how, but they would be different.

A couple days passed before Tim braved the room again, but to his great relief, nothing rattled the door. Not that day, or the next, or any of the days to follow. From time to time, he still had the feeling that he wasn't alone, but it was fleeting, and he was soon so engrossed in his work that it hardly troubled him.

The work—that was all that mattered. He focused his whole being on the cartoons. But when he finally showed Maggie the strips, he encountered a problem he hadn't anticipated.

"Wow," she said, marveling at the artwork laid out on their kitchen table. The kids were asleep, and the house still smelled like the Swedish meatballs they'd had for dinner. In the bathroom, water streamed into the tub. She pushed

Every muscle in Tim's body turned to ice.

a strand of her hair behind her ear and leaned closer. When she did, the fold of her terrycloth bathrobe fell open, revealing a hint of breast. Ordinarily, this would have stoked some desire within him, but he felt nothing but the urge to close her robe for her. "This is amazing," she said. "I love the coke bottle glasses on the otter. Very cute."

"Thank you," he said, beaming.

"I'm very impressed. I didn't even know you were spending much time on this."

He didn't like the way she said the word time. It made him suspicious. "What do you mean?"

"Well, all this stuff—it's a lot. You're never up in your office for more than a few minutes. Have you been working on it at school?"

"Oh," he said, his mind racing. "Yes. I've—I've worked at it on my lunches. And while students are doing projects. You know, here and there. Got to find the time somewhere." He laughed nervously.

She looked at him, eyes narrowing.

"What?" he said.

"You," she said. "It's like you're not telling me something."

"Maggie, don't be ridiculous."

"Is something going on?"

"No!" The blinds in the living room window were open, and the gaping darkness suddenly bothered him. He went to them and closed them. "I hate that we leave these open all the time. Anybody could be out there watching."

"Why would somebody be watching?" Maggie asked.

"What? This is silly; I'm going upstairs."

Maggie shrugged. "Okay. You'll be down in three minutes anyway."

Tim didn't answer. He was afraid his voice would betray him if he did. His whole body was shaking.

He made several changes. The first was that he made sure to spend a little longer in his actual office before coming downstairs. The second was that he decided that he would be much more careful in how much, if any, of his work he shared—not just with Maggie, but with anyone. It would raise questions, he saw that now. Those questions could lead people to finding out about the hidden room, and he couldn't have that. More important than even becoming a professional cartoonist was protecting his secret.

This was his room. If other people found out, they'd want in, and it was a small room. There wasn't space for anyone else. Even worse, the publicity might bring in the media hounds—and after that would be the religious nut jobs, the paranormal investigators, the skeptics. It would all be ruined.

Unfortunately, matters only got worse with Maggie. She complained that he was distracted. That their sex life was in the toilet. That when he was with Alexa or Jared, he looked like he wanted to be somewhere else. The fights were something terrible to behold—shouting until they were red-faced and hoarse. More than once he raised his fist before catching himself. He'd never hit her before, but he was coming so close, and he saw something in her eyes he'd never seen before—fear.

He knew this was because of the room. He knew he was spending too much time in there—days in a row, weeks even, with only the briefest forays back into a world in which time passed. He was becoming disconnected with his other life. He had to pull back. He had to pull back or he was going to lose himself.

It was Alexa that finally drove this point home. He finished reading her a book—which one, he'd forgotten by the time he slid it back on the shelf—and turned out the light. When he leaned over to kiss her forehead, he saw how beautiful she was in the near-darkness: his blonde angel, with flawless olive skin and big brown eyes. He felt the clench of the bittersweet love that only a parent can know, the strange concoction of adoration and grief.

It was a gray, gaunt, ghost of a man, with hollowed eye sockets and skin like parched sand.

"My little princess," he said.

"My big daddy," she said, smiling up at him.

"Do you know how much I love you?" It was their little game.

"Lots and lots?"

"Oh yes. There aren't enough lots to say how many lots I love you."

He kissed her forehead, the flesh so tender and soft. He turned and she kissed him on his stubbled cheek. It reminded him that he'd forgotten to shave before coming downstairs—something that had been happening more frequently. When he leaned back, he saw great concern in her eyes.

"What is it, sweetie?" he said.

"Daddy, why is your hair getting gray?"

It was a cold blade straight to the gut. His mind raced, trying to come up with the appropriate response, something to put her heart at ease, even though he knew exactly why his hair had been going gray. How

much time had he been spending up there? How much older was he than he should have been? A year? Two? Five?

The shame that washed over him made his knees wobbly. He may not have been robbing his daughter of precious minutes with her father now, but he was taking years from her on the back end. Would he even be there to see her graduate from high school? For the first time he realized that though the hidden room was giving him time, it was also taking his time from everyone else.

"Oh, just getting a little older dear," he said to her, hoping she wouldn't notice the strange quaver in his voice. "Nothing to worry about." And he thought to himself: Enough. This is it. It ends now.

But of course it didn't. He spent more time up there than ever.

In the world of his hidden room, everything felt right. Tim created piles and piles of cartoons—not just his Cold Creek Gang, but four new strips. He soon ran out of room and began clearing out the stamp books, thinking he'd stash the money in the room for emergencies. Then the proprietor at the local collectible shop asked a few too many questions and that was the end of it. Tim put them all in boxes and left them outside the local Boys & Girls Club one morning. He felt good about that. It was one of the few things in recent days he felt good about.

For in the real world, the world where time stops for no man, life continued to unravel. The fights between him and Maggie grew worse, and then stopped altogether—replaced by a terrible, hateful silence. He started home from the neighborhood park one day, telling himself Alexa wouldn't miss him, she was playing with some neighborhood friends on the swings—and only caught himself when he was halfway home. At school, parents complained. They said their children told them that their art teacher often disappeared for half the class, claiming he had to go to the bathroom, but then someone spotted him driving away from the school. The principal told him if it happened again, he'd be suspended.

He was only five minutes away, he figured. He could be back in minutes. They would never know.

When he looked at himself in the mirror each morning—and morning was a relative term, because he was so out of sync with the reality of night and day—the person who gazed back at him was not himself. It was a gray, gaunt, ghost of a man, with hollowed eye sockets and skin like parched sand. He knew the hidden room was destroying him. He knew it, and yet he felt powerless to stop it.

It was only when he came home from school one day—at lunch, planning to spend more time upstairs—and found Maggie packing the suitcases, that some tiny remnant of self-preservation finally sparked inside him.

"What's this?" he said.

She looked up from the rainbow of tightly packed socks, and he saw, for the first time, that she had changed too. She was painfully thin, her eyes like dull marbles, her skin looking as if it might flake away like an old papier-mâché doll left too long in the sun. The first pink buds of spring spotted the rhododendron outside the window. In the living room, where the kids were parked in front of the television, Dora the Explorer was counting to ten in Spanish.

"We're going to my parents," she announced.

It took a few seconds for the implication to hit him. The world pressed in on him, the pressure increasing as if he were in a diving bell sinking fast into the dark sea. His throat constricted, and when he tried to say her name, it came out a sputtering cough. He took a step toward her and she held up a hand.

"Don't," she said.

"But, Maggie, please—"

"I'm not arguing. I don't know what's happened to you, but it's not good for us here anymore. It's not even safe."

"I can do better."

"You've said that before."

Had he? He vaguely remembered fragments of conversations about his behavior, telling her he was just in a funk, that things would improve, but they all had the fuzzy qualities of dreams. She zipped up the suitcase and then moved to the next one.

"You need help, Tim. You need to call that number I gave you."

"I'm not on drugs."

She pressed down on her shirts, flattening them. "I wish I could believe you."

"Shh! For God's sake, the children!"

"I'm not on drugs!" he cried. "I'm not drinking or anything like that! Have you smelled it on my breath? Have you found pills? Have you found anything?"

"Shh! For God's sake, the children!"

"Maggie—"

"Please don't. Please. I've made my decision. Now you need to make yours."

All three suitcases were zipped.

She really was going. He couldn't believe she was really going. He saw that her eyes were watery, and it gave him hope. She still cared. She hadn't stopped caring.

When she started for the door, he dropped to his knees and begged her to stay. She tried stepping around him and he hugged her legs. He thought, if he just held on tight enough, she wouldn't go. She cursed him and tried to tug her legs free, but he didn't loosen his grip. Then she slapped him hard on the side of the head. It rattled him enough that his eyes watered and his ears rang, but he held fast. She slapped him again, sobbing, but he wouldn't let go. If he let go, he knew he would die.

"Okay!" he cried finally. "Okay, dear God, I'll show you! I'll show you everything! Please don't leave! I need you! I need you to save me!"

Of course, she was suspicious. Why wouldn't she be? It sounded like the mad ravings of a drunk or a meth addict. I've got a room where time doesn't pass. But after he pleaded with her to just give him a chance, and she agreed with an exhausted reluctance, it only took a couple demonstrations for her weariness to be replaced first with amazement, then with a mixture of anger and sympathy.

"This?" she said, running her hand along the portfolio books that packed the shelves. "This is what you've been doing all this time?"

He nodded. He saw her considering, processing, judging. Was it relief he saw or something else, something darker? His paranoia briefly got the best of him, and he imagined her bringing another man up here. How would he ever know? Then her eyes welled up, and he thought, this has to be it. If he didn't do it now, he never would.

"I know what we need to do," he said. "Do you trust me?"

She looked at him, all the fatigue showing on her face like the spots and divots on an old mattress.

"I need you to trust me," he said.

"Tim—"

"Please, Maggie."

"The kids are downstairs. I need to—"

"No time has passed for the kids. Please, it will only work if you trust me."

She closed her eyes, hugging her chest, and rocked a little on her feet. "All right," she whispered. "I'll trust you. This one time."

"Good," he said, "I won't fail you. How much gasoline do we have in the garage?"

Several months elapsed before they were able to locate a suitable replacement—another cottage, this one down by the river—and another month after that for the deal to close. The insurance company raised a few eyebrows about their story of a raccoon knocking over the camping lantern in the garage, but they didn't hold up the money. By that first Saturday in July, Tim was wheeling the last of the boxes down the ramp of the U-Haul. He was amazed at how much stuff they'd managed to accumulate in the few months they'd lived in the hotel.

A warm breeze swayed the Douglas firs surrounding their property, briefly giving him a glimpse of the sloping roofline of their only visible neighbor. From the garage, Maggie emerged from the maze of furniture and crates with a glass of lemonade. He parked the hand truck and took the drink gladly, pressing the cool glass against his sweaty forehead.

She wore a pink cotton sundress that bared her arms, and he saw how her skin was freckling like it did when she spent a lot of time in the sun. A few months ago, he wouldn't have even noticed. It made him happy, noticing.

"Both kids down?" he said.

She nodded. "At the same time. Miracle, isn't it?"

"Quick, let's make a run for it."

"Not very funny."

But she smiled and it was not a wan smile or a forced one. It had taken months for her to smile that way again. There was still doubt and suspicion that occasionally flashed across her face like an emergency broadcast message, but he hoped that would go away in time. He'd have to earn it. He knew that.

He took a drink, savoring how the cool sweetness relieved his parched throat. She was still looking at him.

"What?" he said.

"I thought, you know, that you might want to come inside."

"Why?"

Her gaze strobed his body, and when she looked up at him again, there was a certain glimmer in her eyes.

"Oh," he said. "Oh."

She smiled impishly, then turned and sashayed her way back to the door—sashaying being the perfect way to describe that seductive movement of her hips. When she got to the doorway, she gave him a single glance over her shoulder, all by itself enough to set his arousal on fire. He placed his glass on a stack of boxes and started after her.

On his way through the garage, he passed the plastic jug of gasoline for the lawn mower, the one he'd picked up just that afternoon from Target. It would be a strange irony if the house burned down by accident. Since this house came with a good-sized shed, he grabbed the jug and huffed it outside, to the backyard. It would only take a second.

He waded through the tall grass and slid open the creaky metal door. He saw some old plywood sheets, some moss-covered paving

stones, and a rusted garbage can, stuff the previous owners had left behind, and he set the jug just inside the door. He was turning to go—the image of Maggie stretching out on their bare mattress buzzing in his brain—when a queer feeling overwhelmed him.

He was not alone.

It was unmistakable. There was no other feeling quite like it, and Tim was seized with a terrible panic. Not now. It couldn't be happening now.

Everything inside him told him to shut the door, but he had to know. The plywood sheets, the way they were leaning against the back of the shed—something could be behind them. It was possible.

His sweat turning cold, he inched his way to the back of the shed, shuffling over the sawdust and dirt that coated the concrete slab. The shadows deepened. The air was thick and humid, choking him with each rapid breath. He grabbed the sheets—there were three of them, each not more than an inch thick—and with a shaking hand slid them away from the wall.

There was a doorknob.

It was the same silver knob, scratched, loose in its socket, that he knew so well. A small whine of protest rose up, and Tim froze, thinking some animal was in there with him before he realized that he was making the sound. No. No, it wasn't fair. This wasn't giving him a fighting chance.

But even as he thought this, he watched his hand move of its own accord, the fingers closing around the knob. The cold seared into his flesh, but he didn't care. It was waiting for him. His room. He could step inside and once again have all the time in the world.

There was a loud click, and he flinched.

There was someone on the other side! He jerked the knob, but it was locked. The searing cold spread up his fingers to his arm. Then the anger washed over him and he began to jerk the knob back and forth. He'd break it down. It was his room.

"Hey!" someone cried.

The idea that another person had taken over his hidden room only increased his rage. He let go of the knob, searching for something that could help him get inside. His gaze fell upon the mossy paving stones and he grabbed the top one and hefted it high over his head. They couldn't have it. The room was only for him.

"Who's there?"

Tim gaped in horror at the door. The voice—he knew it now. It was unmistakable.

"Maggie," the voice said, "is that you?"

That's when Tim remembered—that day, soon after he'd found the room, when someone rattled the doorknob. Now, impossible as it seemed, he was the one on the outside.

"Go away," the person on the inside said, voice trembling with obvious fear. "This is my room."

He saw himself then as if from a distant camera—this crazed lunatic, eyes ablaze, a square stone held aloft. He saw the full reality of what he was, of what he would always be, no matter how many houses he burned or where he went in life. The room would always be with him. There was no running from it.

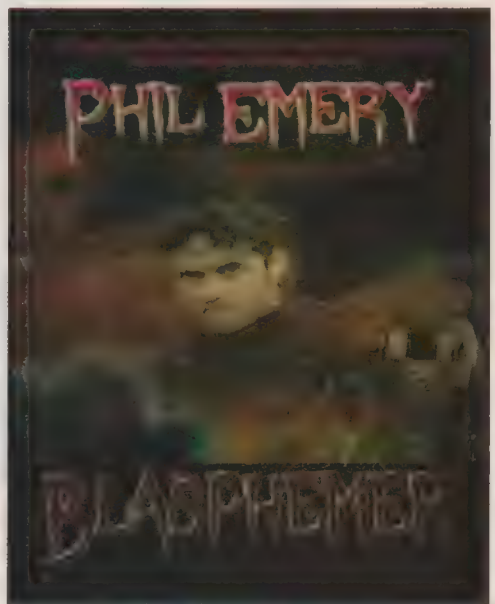
For a few precious seconds, he stood paralyzed, a man poised to dive into an abyss more dark and deep than any he had ever known. It beckoned to him just beyond the door.

Then, with a convulsive shudder, he lowered the stone and placed it on the stack. Despite the heat, he trembled. There was no running, this was true. But there was turning away. He could turn. He could be strong enough—today, now. That was all that mattered. Being strong enough now. He could find some time here and there. He could carve it out like everyone else.

It took all the strength he had, but he turned.

About the Author:

Scott William Carter lives in Oregon with his wife and two children. Publishers Weekly called his first book, *The Last Great Getaway of the Water Balloon Boys*, a "touching and impressive debut." His short fiction has appeared in such venues as *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, Realms of Fantasy, Analog*, and *Asimov's SF*, as well as in various anthologies. His collection, *The Dinosaur Diaries and Other Tales Across Space and Time*, was recently published by Fantastic Books. Find out more about his work at www.scottwilliamcarter.com.



BLASPHEMER

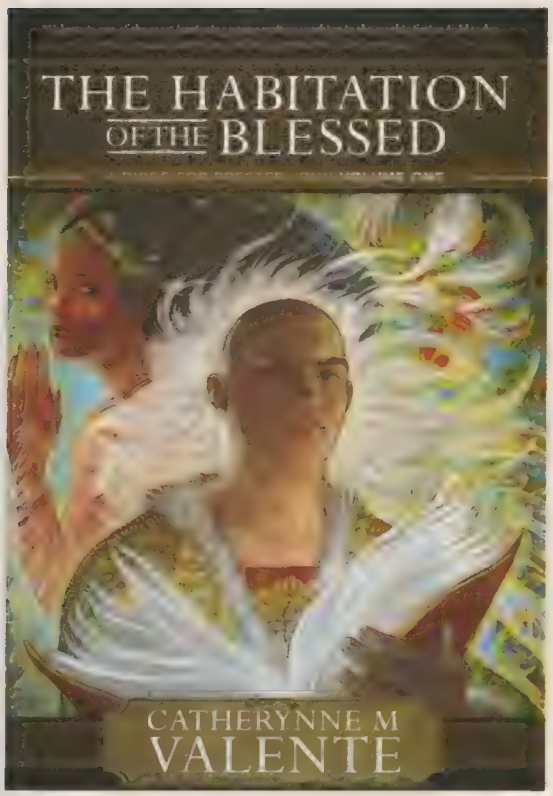
A DARK FANTASY NOVELLA
BY PHIL EMERY

ISBN 978-1-61572-264-8 ebook
ISBN 978-1-61572-265-5 paperback

Books

by Paul Witcover and Elizabeth Bear

Catherynne M. Valente's lush fantasies are beautifully written and daringly conceived, hyper-intelligent but grounded in earthy sensuality. They are marvels of sophisticated literary technique and structure, yet they are also compulsively readable. A self-labeled "mythpunk," Valente builds her stories around critical revisions of fairy tales, myths, and folklore, usually with a feminist slant but not to the exclusion of other concerns. She is one of the most gifted writers to emerge in the genre in the last decade, a true original whose work builds on that of predecessors as varied as John Barth and Elizabeth Hand but blazes its own exotic trail.



Her new novel, ***The Habitation of the Blessed*** **(Night Shade Books, trade paperback, 272 pp., $14.99, ISBN: 978-1597801997)**, the first volume of a new series, may be her most audacious and accomplished yet, which is saying something. In previous novels, Valente has drawn on such familiar sources as the Thousand and One Nights, but here she turns her attention to something a bit more obscure—the legends surrounding the figure of Prester John, that apocryphal Christian monarch of the middle ages. In this and other things—especially the presence of characters based on some of the most bizarre entries in medieval bestiaries, such as monopods and blemmyae (headless humanoids whose faces are on their chests), the novel is clearly indebted to Umberto Eco's *Baudolino*, but the story Valente tells is very much her own.

Make that *stories*. For like her other novels, *Habitation* is densely woven from multiple narrative strands that intersect in surprising ways, sometimes answering questions, sometimes raising them. The framing story features an elderly priest and translator, Hiob von Luzern, who leads an expedition in quest of the mysterious Prester John in 1699. In the vicinity of Lahore, he encounters a woman who leads him to a tree whose branches are not laden with fruit but rather books. From that tree, he is permitted to pluck three books. This he does; but the books are, like fruit, subject to the processes of decay, and so he undertakes to transcribe them, racing against their decomposition. The first book, *The Word in the Quince*, purports to be by Prester John himself, recording how he comes to what he calls *India Ultima* by crossing an ocean of sand, and what he finds there—not just the strange creatures I touched on above but the secret of immortality itself. The second, *The Book of the Fountain*, is the autobiography of a blemmye named Hagia, who becomes the wife of Prester John. The third is *The Scarlet Nursery*, and it relates the stories told by a panoti (a humanoid with huge, almost prehensile ears) named Imtithal to her three young charges, the children of an earlier ruler of *India Ultima*, Queen Abir, who instituted a distinctive custom whereby, every three centuries, every immortal inhabitant of that land enters a lottery which determines how they will spend the next three hundred years: in what occupation, whether married or alone, whether they will give birth or not, and so on; at the same time, all past relationships are dissolved, as if they had never existed—all to prevent the calcification of a culture whose members live forever. And that's not all, for toward the end of the novel, another voice enters the choir: Hiob's assistant, a young monk named Alaric, whom Hiob drafts to assist in his rushed transcriptions.

Valente's control over this potential chaos of material—of characters who, because they are immortal, yet adopt different names and occupations over time, may appear multiple times in different narratives—never falters. It's an awesome achievement, especially since she incorporates the physical degradation of the books into her storytelling, producing fragments that are only partially legible, yet which, in their

very incompleteness, are essential to the plot.

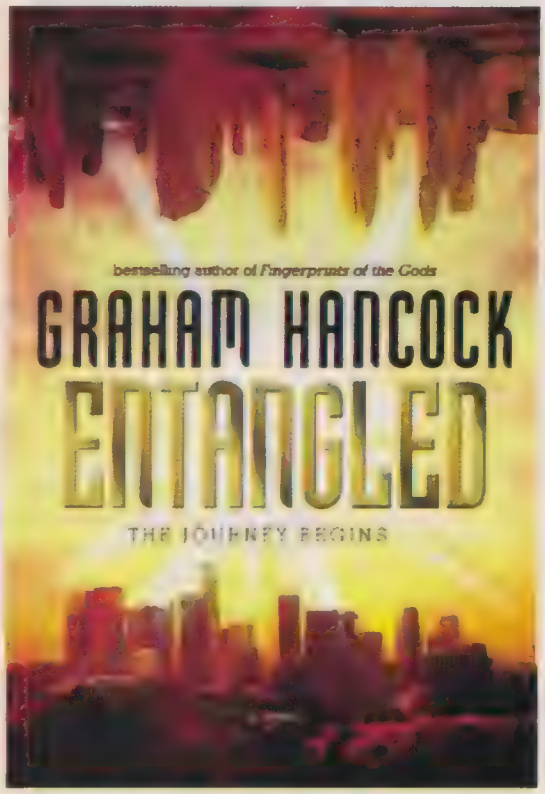
Faith and Christianity are central to the novel: motivating all the Western characters and assailing all the others. There are many opportunities for satire, and Valente avails herself of them, and for the kind of surreal flights of fanciful logic beloved by Lewis Carroll, and she quite expertly indulges in those as well, but the heart of this novel is a sympathetic one. It's a love story, a story of sacrifice and redemption, of sin and forgiveness. This is that *rara avis*, a genuine fantasy.

—Review by Paul Witcover

The story of how I came to review ***Entangled*** **(The Disinformation Company, trade paperback, 448 pp., $16.95, ISBN: 978-1934708569)**, Graham Hancock's trippy, ludicrous, violent, yet engrossing cross-temporal thriller is itself a tale of entanglement. Long-time readers of this magazine will recall that, years ago, the writer and critic Paul Di Filippo was a regular presence here at *Realms of Fantasy;* indeed, I stepped into the breach when he moved on. That is but one degree of entanglement; another is our shared first name; and still another, the fact that we are both members of a group blog, The Inferior4+1. Any or all of these are perhaps sufficient to explain how, some months ago, I wound up with Paul's review copy of this novel, and he with mine. But given the circumstances, and the book's title, I felt as if the universe itself was politely requesting a review. Who am I to say no to the universe?

Entangled is the first book of a trilogy, and if the next two books continue as this one has begun, Hancock just might have a hit on his hands. This is the kind of book that attracts a cult following—then explodes into mainstream success. That's not a prediction, but neither would I be surprised if it happened.

Hancock sets his tale in two different periods of time, with two narrative threads that intersect at multiple points. The first is set 24,000 years ago in Stone Age Spain, where a seventeen-year-old human girl, Ria, and her clan find themselves overrun by murderous outsiders who possess superior technology and follow an incarnate demon called Sulpa. Also present in this time are the last of the Neanderthals, whom Hancock presents as peaceful, non-violent creatures with mental capacities equivalent to those of humans but strikingly different in two respects. The first and most obvious is that the Neanderthals, while mute, possess telepathy; generally this ability does not extend to humans, but in the case of Ria and some others it does, enabling cross-species communication to take place. The second is that the Neanderthals are unable to grasp certain modes of thought that come easily to humans: hunting tactics, for example, that can be extended to military purposes, as well as technological advances in weaponry. This lack has left them outmatched in competition with humans, and this, Hancock implies, is one facet in their extinction. Another is the racism of human beings, most of whom view the Uglies, as they call them, as no more than animals fit for butchering. Yet the Uglies are more advanced than humans when it comes to spirituality. They experience a profound sense of connection with all life on earth; this is partly an outgrowth of their telepathy and pacifism, but it has more to do with their habitual ingestion of hallucinogenic mushrooms that put them into contact with a divine entity known by various names, including Our Lady of the Forest. The Lady is the protector of life, the enemy of Sulpa. Yet for all her power, she cannot strike at him directly, because she is not incarnate in the world. To fight him, she requires flesh-and-blood intermediaries. Ria is one of them.



Before I move on to the other time period, let me explain what I meant by calling the novel "ludicrous." It doesn't have to do with Hancock's depiction of Neanderthals, or the Carlos Castaneda-like business of hallucinogenically generated divinities—those are actually two of my favorite elements of the book. No, what I was referring to was Hancock's regrettable decision to make his Stone Age human characters talk and think like modern people. While he grants that "we can't know how people spoke 24,000 years ago," he argues that "whatever their style of speech [was], it is a reasonable supposition that it could be translated into the idiom of any other time and place." But this is simply not true. Anyone who has studied ancient cultures, or even so-called primitive cultures today, should know that modern modes of thought and action are not merely translations from one idiom to another:

on the contrary, while human cultural and psychological potential has probably remained fairly constant over millennia, that potential has not been realized in the same way or to the same degree across the centuries. You can no more translate with a hope of authenticity the speech and inner thought processes of a human being of 24,000 years ago into modern idiom than you could bring that person from the past to the future and expect them to adapt successfully to our time. Now, perhaps it is churlish of me to fasten on this point of implausibility in a novel that features telepathy and astral time travel, but it results in such infelicities of expression as this, from the first page, where Ria, who is a dab hand with a sling, misses her target: "Who the *fuck* had spoiled her shot?" This is jarring the first time it's encountered, and while it becomes less of a shock through repetition, it never becomes anything but annoying. Admittedly, a writer who sets a novel in the deep past has to deal with this problem; some solutions are better than others. This is a bad one. But though it's a misstep, it only causes Hancock's story to stumble, not fall.

The Lady's second intermediary is a seventeen-year-old California girl from our own time. Leoni is sexually promiscuous, a voracious consumer of drugs and alcohol: a party girl, in short, with a chip on her shoulder that is really more like a dagger in her back, planted figuratively—if not literally—by her parents, who seem to wish her nothing but ill. Her father raped her repeatedly when she was younger, apparently with her mother's complicity; that he seemed to take no pleasure in the act, as though performing a distasteful but necessary duty, only makes her memories of it more surreal. Now her parents, who of course have always denied that any abuse took place, commit her, after an overdose, to a hospital, and then to a facility that seems as much about punishment as treatment. During her overdose, Leoni has an out-of-body experience in which she encounters the Lady—whom she calls the Blue Angel, and who helps her to return to her body. Soon, with the help of a doctor researching out-of-body experiences, she escapes and becomes part of his study.

Things move fast and furious from that point on. Sulpa and his minions are active in the present as well as the past. Already incarnate in the past, the demon seeks a host in the present; if he accomplishes this, he will quite literally institute hell on earth. Needless to say, Leoni figures in these plans. Yet she is also key to defeating him. But first she must master certain skills—astral travel among them, for the battle she must fight is in the past, at Ria's side—that depend upon heavy doses of Ayahuasca, a potent hallucinogen native to South America that is better known to Westerners by the name of yagé. Hancock claims in his introduction to have experienced many trips with Ayahuasca, which he categorizes as an almost divine consciousness intent on teaching wisdom. In fact, the plot and characters of the novel, he maintains, came to him during "a series of sessions in Brazil, in a ceremonial space overlooked by an image of a blue goddess." Excuse me while I book my ticket to Brazil...

Hancock is a professional writer, but as far as I can tell, this is his first novel. Otherwise he has published only New Agey topics, and there is more than a whiff of that here. But on the whole he proves adept at moving the action along and—with the exception noted above—delineating his two main characters believably. At times, surprisingly, given his focus on swift pacing via short, choppy chapters that invariably end with cliff-hangers, his descriptive passages slow things down and introduce welcome elements of reflection or even poetry.

It's too bad *Entangled* is pubbing in mid-October, because it's a quintessential beach read. But what the heck—grab a copy, bundle yourself up, make a nice hot cup of cocoa, and pretend you're sipping Ayahuasca on a beach in Brazil. In some reality, you are.

—Review by Paul Witcover

Helen Lowe's *The Heir of Night* (HarperCollins/EOS, mass market paperback, 480 pages, $7.99, ISBN: 978-0061734045) begins with a young girl, Malian, exploring the abandoned Old Keep that is surrounded by her father the Earl's "new" steading. But the dusty ruin is full of unexpected, bestial soldiers and a rapacious, soul-eating monster of dark power, and before she knows it she is on the run. Malian is joined by an apprentice priest (people of magical power are marginalized for reasons that

remained unconvincing to me, and forced to join the priesthood in exile), and the two of them stumble upon the secret heart of the citadel's power—and together they manage to use that power to fight off the invaders, though not before the invaders have done significant damage.

However, these events reveal that the Earl's daughter also has powers, such as the ancient heroes had, and thus Malian must be exiled to the priestly quarters of another keep—despite a prophesy which would seem to indicate that she is the key to holding back the forces of evil. Meanwhile, heralds (who also have magical powers) have arrived at the Keep and assisted in the recovery of the Heir. There follows a long ride, and a betrayal that I found a little too telegraphed.

I had problems with the world-building and the pacing of this book. A lot of the societal choices seemed designed not to illustrate a believable culture, but rather to set up a rat-maze for the characters to stumble through. In addition, the pace of the book itself is very slow, both because of significant repetition problems and because, when confronted with any threat, the characters tend to take a chapter or two to talk it over before taking any action.

That said, I enjoyed the strong female characters. Lowe is also adept at evoking atmosphere, and one of the strongest images in the book is of the brooding stone keep, new construction encircling the old and cursed, guarding a great rift between worlds. Lowe manages to make the place feel close and massive, hunched against the weight of torchlit centuries. In addition, I liked her psychically linked heralds, and the Earl and his daughter Malian's prickly relationship—it seemed just right as a portrayal of a family that feels great duty to one another while barely knowing each other.

Although *The Heir of Night* does manage some striking scene-setting and neat ideas, it ultimately proves frustrating.

—Review by Elizabeth Bear

Also frustrating is **Cheyenne McCray's *Vampires Not Invited* (St. Martin's Press, mass market paperback, 480 pages, $7.99, ISBN: 978-0312532680)**, which is clumsy in both its sentence-level writing and its plot. Although it's a first-person novel, the protagonist's blue hair and amethyst skin (Nyx is half dark-elf) receive constant attention and mention, an auctorial tic that got under my skin after the second or third time. In addition, this is one of those first-person mystery-thrillers in which significant quantities of the information that the protagonist needs is obtained through fortuitous overhearing. It started to feel a little *Scooby Do* after a while, especially as Nyx's powers are as plot-convenient as could be desired. She has control of elemental magics at wildly varying power levels; sometimes she can hide herself from the enemies (I suppose, given the title, it's not too much of a spoiler to admit they're vampires) and at other times—when the plot demands she be captured—her glamour fails utterly.

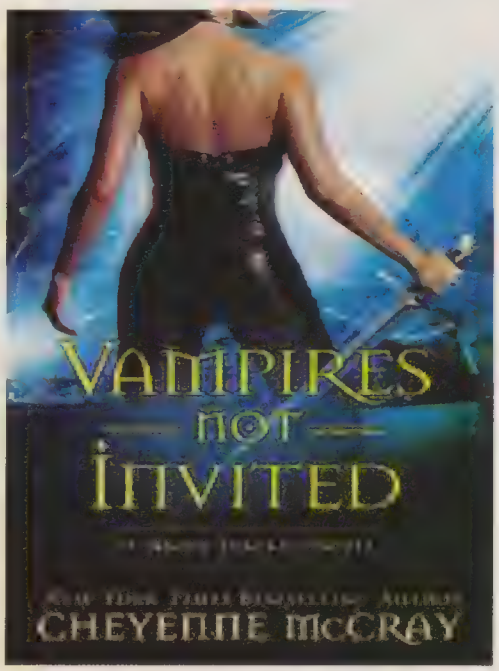
I also quickly became annoyed with the narrative's tendency to assign any exceptional human achievement (i.e., the 1980 USA Olympic hockey team) to fairy changelings.

Even so, there's something to commend here, quite a few things actually. The book's thematic argument takes grappling runs at some problematic aspects of US foreign policy, and the protagonist gets points for being neither mouthy nor brittle. Additionally, Nix has female friends and lots of them, and they have believable girl relationships. And she has actual working relationships with her superiors.

Vampires Not Invited is structured much like a Bond movie, in many respects, although without the tendency of random buxom females to faint willingly into the protagonist's arms. It's a romp, in other words—a fast-paced adventure that does not reward too-careful reading, but definitely a suitable distraction for a plane.

Also, the bit with the Statue of Liberty's toenails is priceless.

—Review by Elizabeth Bear



Paranormal Romance & Urban Fantasy

by Elizabeth Bear

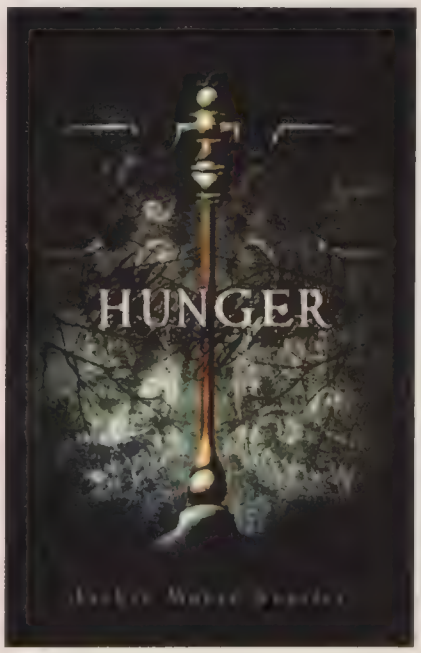
Our first book this month is Alayna Williams's ***Rogue Oracle*** **(Pocket, mass market paperback, 352 pages $7.99, ISBN 978-1439182819)**. This book is the sequel to *Dark Oracle*, reviewed in this column last year, the second in Williams's series about forensic psychologist, trauma survivor, and cartomancer Tara Sheridan. Tara is slowly making her comeback from an encounter with a serial killer who nearly killed her. She is no longer an FBI agent, but she now consults for the Bureau, and she's become romantically involved with Harry Li, who remains a special agent. Tara tries to prevent the other oracles, who form a secret society from which she had distanced herself, from regaining control over her. And she is also trying to protect Cassie (a young woman who also has powers of foresight, and for whom Tara feels a personal responsibility) from those selfsame oracles, who are determined to make Cassie their leader.

This is a classic Mulder and Scully setup—two tough agents dealing with paranormal happenings, one of them a believer and the other a skeptic, and it works quite well. *Rogue Oracle* has a lot of strong points, and it's less twitchy and tic-ish about reminding us of Tara's traumatic past than the previous novel. Her relationship with Harry handled well, remaining knife-edge and uncomfortable not because of contrivance or lack of communication but because both people involved are gun-shy and damaged. And Harry himself is a great character—strong, complicated, and determined to be his better self—although not always successful in that determination.

The plot of this book, however, is not as strong as that of the last one. This story concerns the duo's attempt to catch a supernatural terrorist bent on punishing the world for forgetting the misery of Chernobyl. This chimerical individual—who has a particularly horrific superpower—is hunting down retired spies, who have knowledge of the location of decommissioned Soviet nuclear material, with the intent of creating a dirty bomb.

Williams's investigative scenes remain well-researched and finely detailed, and she handles complex moral ambiguities with attention and compassion. However, the novel's plot seems somewhat arbitrary and happenstance in places, and while I liked the madcap pair of US marshals who appear at one point to provide witness protection, they seemed curiously out of place in such a dark novel, as if they had wandered by from a passing spy parody and gotten sucked up in the plot.

A certain thinness of plot also haunts ***Hunger*** by Jackie Morse Kessler **(Graphia, trade paperback, 180 pages, $8.99, ISBN 978-0547341248)**, a young adult novel about Lisabeth Lewis, a girl with anorexia who is tapped to become one of the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse: Famine. The world Lisabeth lives in is real and developed; the plot, alas, less so.



However, Kessler makes up for a certain shakiness in plot with deft characterization, believable teen girls, and a light hand with her protagonist's controlling mother and alcoholic father. Also, Lisabeth's boyfriend and her two close girlfriends are beautifully written and

characterized. This lends an air of believability to the book, which would otherwise be too cute in its casting of dead pop stars as Death.

Hunger does not flinch at all from the details of Lisabeth's disease or depression, but nor is it prurient or exploitative. Instead, I found it a sensitive treatment of the topic, written in a pellucid style, that only wavers when Lisabeth gets a far-too-easy path out of her predicament. I didn't mind that too much, however, because while the solution to her problems (she doesn't really want to *be* one of the Four) is sort of handed to her, she also doesn't get an epiphanic healing. Any gains she achieves, she works for—and when she finally finds the courage to confront her own denial, it makes for a satisfying resolution.

Nobody in Freda Warrington's ***Midsummer Night*** **(Tor, hardcover, 415 pages, $27.99, ISBN: 978-0765318701)** gets off easy. Warrington is a long-established UK author, little known on this side of the Atlantic, and in this book she's penned a fairy story more in the tradition of John Crowley than Charles de Lint. The sequel to *Elfland* is beautifully written, an elegantly constructed book that suffers only slightly from pacing problems.

As the story opens, the protagonist, recently disabled competition runner Gill Sharma, has moved to a small cottage on the grounds of a stately home in Scotland inhabited by Dame Juliana Flagg, a renowned artist who has not exhibited a piece in ten years. The intricate plot does rely a bit on coincidence, but considerably less so than the Shakespeare play from which it takes its name (Midsummer Night is the night when the walls between the worlds are thin), but it offers enough delights to make up for it.

Gill has come to Scotland in order to recuperate from a car accident that left her hip and her confidence shattered. She forces herself to walk long distances despite her pain, and accidentally wanders through a gate to a village called Boundry that does not appear on any map. There, she meets a mysterious and superficially solicitous man in what she takes for a public house, and is served by a silent bartender. When that bartender later turns up on her doorstep in the night, raving mad and begging for her help, Gill is drawn into the heart of mysterious happenings, while fighting a burgeoning addiction to pain killers. She must try to understand how to live and regain her courage in a place on the borders of a deeply treacherous otherworld.

Erzebet YellowBoy's ***Sleeping Helena*** **(Prime Books, trade paperback, 304 pages, $14.95, ISBN: 978-1607012122)** also involves a girl and a house, but in this case it's not so much a fairy story as a modern-dress re-enactment of "Sleeping Beauty"—without fairies or spindles. The magic in this world is embodied in a sisterhood of extremely long-lived women, the oldest of whom wishes to treacherously use poor Helena to avenge an ancient wrong... much to Helena's detriment.

Both *Sleeping Helena* and *Midsummer Night* involve the families in the long-term aftermath of murdered brothers. In *Sleeping Helena*, a good deal of the narrative tension revolves around a glittering birthday party on a stormy night, and its echo a hundred years later. There are magic mirrors, forbidden love affairs, and ancient wounds held close to the heart. There is scandal, long memories, wild rides by night, and rivalries galore. There are thorny briars that never bloom.

I liked this book a great deal. It has an understated strength that is reinforced by its level of cool emotional reserve. Helena, raised as nothing but a vessel for the sisters' gifts, grows accountably strange. The sisters, who have made Helena, become more and more confused by her. While portions or the narrative are somewhat static and Helena herself a sociopathic cipher, these things serve to reinforce her distance, which becomes a metaphor for both the selfishness of children and the relentlessness of time.

Young Adult Fiction

by Michael Jones

***Enchanted Ivy*, by Sarah Beth Durst, Margaret K. McElderry Books, hardcover, 320pp, $16.99, ISBN 978-1416986454**

When Lily Carter visits Princeton University with her family for Reunions Weekend, she's ready for the usual campus tours and alumni parties. What she gets is a surprise, when she's asked to take the mysterious Legacy Test. Pass, and she's accepted into Princeton, no strings attached. All she has to do is locate the so-called Ivy Key. Lily's quest quickly takes a turn for the bizarre, as the secrets of Princeton unfold around her. Talking gargoyles, boys who become tigers, man-eating monsters, an alternate world full of magic, and a family secret that changes everything. The SATs are nothing compared to cranky dragons, and this test is a killer. Durst's passion for her alma mater shines through with every whimsical, exciting page, as she weaves a captivating, magical tale that demands a sequel.

***Hold Me Closer, Necromancer*, by Lish McBride, Henry Holt and Company, hardcover, 344pp, $16.99, ISBN 978-0805090987**

It's all fun and games for college drop-out and professional fry cook Samhain "Sam" LaCroix, until Seattle's most powerful necromancer recognizes the power Sam didn't even know he possessed. Now Sam's the target of his rival's dark ambitions, and has to get his act together before he finds out what's worse than death. Deadly serious, yet playfully tongue-in-cheek, McBride's debut features an interesting setup populated by entertaining characters, making for an attention-grabbing story.

***Solitary: Escape from Furnace 2*, by Alexander Gordon Smith, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, hardcover, 240pp, $14.99, ISBN 978-0374324926**

Framed for murder, imprisoned for life in the hellish Furnace Penitentiary, Alex Sawyer must escape if he wants to avoid the horrible fate awaiting him in the bowels of the Earth. But when his plan to break out fails, landing him in solitary confinement, he's treated to even more horrifying revelations. You don't die in Furnace; they turn you into a monster...or worse. In this tense, harrowing, claustrophobic sequel to *Lockdown*, Smith puts the nightmarish screws to his hero. Part psychological thriller, part horror, this will have you alternately wanting more, and dreading the next installment.

***Black Hole Sun*, by David Macinnis Gill, Greenwillow Books, hardcover, 340pp, $16.99, ISBN 978-0061673047**

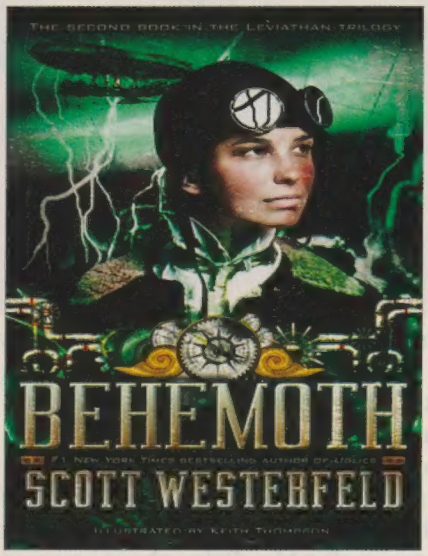
On Mars, you grow up fast or not at all. For Durango, the teenage leader of a motley band of mercenaries, that means taking deadly jobs so he can give his imprisoned father a better life in jail. It also means traveling halfway across the planet to defend broke miners from cannibal raiders, while dealing with rich kid wannabes, lecherous explosive experts, and a know-it-all has-been rounding out his team. It means fighting for his life and praying someone has his back, lest someone stick a knife in it. It means living with shame instead of dying with honor. That's the Mars of this futuristic action-packed adventure, in some ways a pulp throwback full of shamelessly old-fashioned fun, and in some ways a purely modern thrill ride. Gill really knows how to tell a ripping good story.

***Low Red Moon*, by Ivy Devlin, Bloomsbury USA Children's Books, hardcover, 244pp, $16.99, ISBN 978-1599905105**

Following the horrific murder of her parents, which she witnessed but cannot remember, Avery Hood leaves her beloved home in the woods to stay with her grandmother. When she meets Ben, whom she soon discovers to be a werewolf, her memories begin to return. But is the guy she's falling for really a murderer, or is something more sinister afoot? The pressure's on to find out who killed her parents, and

why, before she becomes the next victim. This tension-filled retelling of Red Riding Hood is suspenseful, intriguing, and romantic, looking at the old themes in a whole new light.

***Behemoth: Leviathan, Book Two*, by Scott Westerfeld, Simon Pulse, hardcover, 485pp, $18.99, ISBN 978-1416971757**



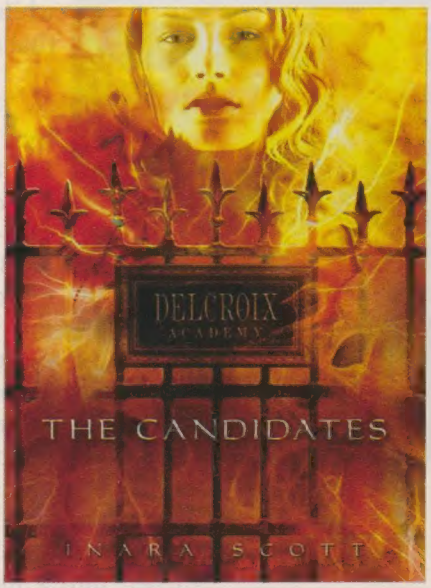
Westerfeld's wildly inventive reworking of the First World War heats up as the Germans and English enter into open hostilities, with bioengineered creatures pitted against mechanical marvels. Aboard the English airship *Leviathan*, Midshipman Deryn Sharp (secretly a girl) and Alek (an Austrian prince in exile) have forged a wary friendship, one that will be tested as they arrive in intrigue-laden Istanbul, where both sides jockey for influence, and revolution is in the air. It's nonstop adventure in the skies and seas, with steampunk war machines, living weapons, derring-do, and swashbuckling a'plenty. Keith Thompson's gorgeous illustrations further bring this amazing world to life, making this a definite don't-miss.

***Torment: A Fallen Novel* (2), by Lauren Kate, Delacorte Books for Young Readers, hardcover, 464pp, $17.99, ISBN 978-0385739146**

Continuing the epic love story between fallen angel Daniel and perpetually reincarnated Luce, this installment sees Luce relocated to the mysterious Shoreline School, secretly home to all sorts of angelic crossbreeds, a place where she can safely come into her powers while Daniel and his allies fight those who would hurt or use her. But the more she learns of her past, the less certain she is of her future with Daniel. Despite the heroine's frequent moments of near-suicidal stupidity, there is a lot to enjoy in this brooding, dark tale of forbidden love stretching across the centuries.

***The Candidates: Delcroix Academy, Book 1*, by Inara Scott, Hyperion Books, hardcover, 294pp, $16.99, ISBN 978-1423116363**

Dancia Lewis has lived her entire life trying not to be noticed, trying to hide the strange power that lashes out of her whenever someone she cares for is in danger. Thus, she's surprised when the Delcroix Academy, a place for the truly elite, awards her a scholarship. Once she's there, she's drawn into a shadowy world of hidden talents and powers just like hers, a world in which nothing is as it seems. But do they have her best interests at heart? That's what she'll have to find out...the hard way. A strong start to a promising new series, it will be interesting to see where the story leads, now that we have some answers. Quite enjoyable, if not spectacular.



***Personal Demons*, by Lisa Desrochers, Tor Teen, trade paperback, 365pp, $9.99, ISBN 978-0765328083**

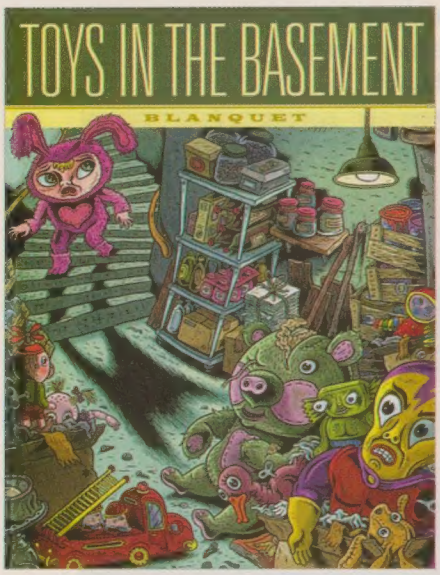
Good girl Frannie Cavanaugh has just become the latest target in the eternal struggle between Heaven and Hell, with demon Luc Cain and angel Gabriel both going undercover in her high school in order to jockey for her favor and subtly tempt her to one side or the other. Drawn to both guys equally, but for very different reasons, Frannie slowly learns just what's going on, and why Heaven and Hell will do anything to claim her. Can she decide the fate of the world based on what's in her heart? The underlying concepts are more interesting than Frannie's indecisive ways and the ping-ponging romantic plot that drives most of the book. Nevertheless, the story has some good moments.

June 2011 We're Celebrating 100 issues of Realms of Fantasy with a 100 page issue!

Graphic Novels

by Andrew Wheeler

It's completely untrue that graphic stories are primarily for younger readers. It's doubly untrue that fantasy stories are only for pre-adults. But, somehow, when these two blithe assumptions come together—when fantasy stories are written with panels and speech-bubbles—they reinforce each other. We see an abundance of graphic novels on the shelf and wrongly assume that they are only for younger readers. But as an adult reader, I've found some of those graphic novels to be quite good—among the strong books that I've recently seen (unfortunately too late for this column) I could mention Aaron Renier's *The Unsinkable Walker Bean,* and *Brain Camp* by Kim, Klavan, and Hicks—while others are not. Let's look at that spectrum more closely.



***Toys in the Basement*, by Stéphane Blanquet, Fantagraphics Books, hardcover, 32pp, $14.99, ISBN 978-1606994023**

Blanquet is a French cartoonist; his only previous work translated into English was a *Dungeon* story (written, as always, by Lewis Trondheim and Joann Sfar). *Toys in the Basement,* though, is wholly his own: a story of two children at a Halloween party who stumble downstairs into the secret world of talking, damaged toys. The story could have easily turned into a morality tale—the toys were all injured, and discarded, by children, and now want to take their revenge on those children—but Blanquet's bright, almost surrealist colors and superdeformed, superdetailed Richard Sala-esque art turn the story into a child's fever dream, as the children try to sneak away from their new "friends" before their true nature is discovered, but are found and punished for their crimes against toys. The plot may be well-loved—the story equivalent of a stuffed toy handed down for four generations—but Blanquet's dialogue and creepy art sell that story; his abused toys are sympathetic victims of children at the same time that they are dangerous would-be tormentors of those same children. The ending may be a slight misstep—it's pretty well-worn itself—but perhaps this "Toy Story" will also spawn sequels to move it beyond that cliché.

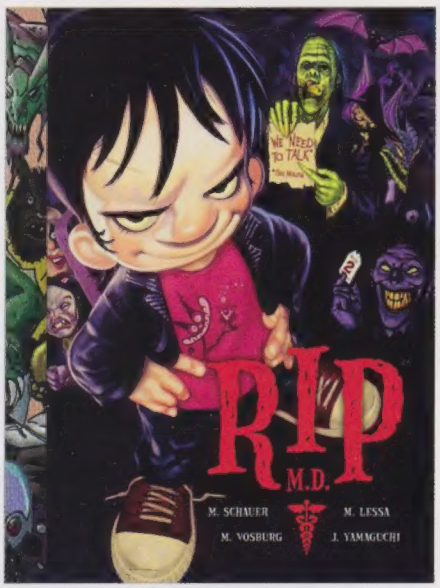
***The Littlest Pirate King,* by David B. and Pierre Mac Orlan, Fantagraphics Books, hardcover, 48pp, $16.99, ISBN 978-1606994030**

David B. is another French cartoonist, best known for his autobiographical book *Epileptic.* Here he adapts a story from the early-twentieth-century novelist Mac Orlan about a cursed pirate crew who adopts a living boy as their mascot, with the plan to slaughter him on his tenth birthday so that they may have a cheerful cabin boy forever afterward. (They perhaps underestimate the effect of death on a boy's attitude.) But the focus of the story is on the melancholy half-life of the pirates, and their eternal efforts to find the peace of death; the boy, Tiny King, only shows up as an infant halfway through. The bulk of the second half of *Pirate King* is an extended scene with the boy, ten years later, learning about life and death from the pirates and begging to be able to stay with them—whatever it takes to achieve that. That turn is executed very quickly—possibly *too* quickly, but this is only a forty-eight-page album, after all—and the end, with the final fate of Tiny King, and the pirates he really doesn't command, is slightly hurried, but David B. packs an impressive amount of melancholy and chill into his ink-drenched panels of gaunt figures obsessing about death.

***RIP, M.D.*, by Mitch Schauer, Mike Vosburg, Michael Lessa & Justin Yamaguchi, Fantagraphics Books, paperback, 88pp, $12.99, ISBN 978-1606993699**

The first two books in this review column may have lines of resemblance to earlier works, but they're honest and original in their stories. But *RIP, M.D.* is blatantly a piece of "intellectual

property" to be "exploited"—the dull and derivative story of a child "monster shrink" that feels like a failed TV pilot. Ripley Plimpt is a boy—he's older than six, but doesn't look *much* older—who has been fascinated with monsters for years, particularly because he obsessively watches movies that were made before his grandparents were born. Ripley knows that monsters just want to be loved and understood, so he's taken to haunting graveyards to find some that he can help—and, as this book opens, he finally gets his chance.



Every dull kids-show cliché you can think of is in here, from the nasty school bullies to their slick real-estate-obsessed evil father—no one *actually* says "And I would have gotten away with it, too, if it weren't for that meddling kid and his dumb monsters!" but it's a close-run thing. Where it isn't dull, it's cloying, and where it isn't tedious, it's twee. There's plenty of generic TV animation available for free; I can see no reason to pay to have it in book form as well.

Next issue April 2011
Dark Fantasy Theme

The Weird, The Monstrous, & The Beautiful: The Art of Brom

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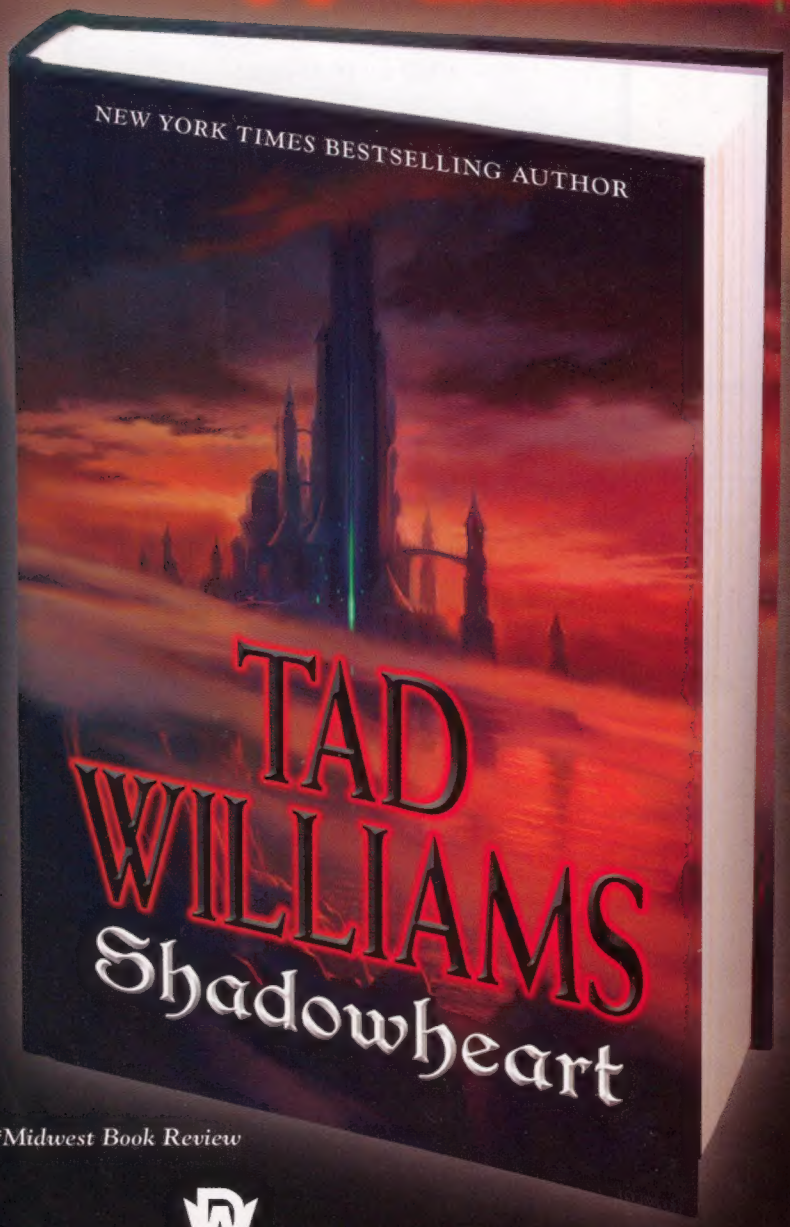

"[Williams's books] are epic, exciting, and filled with fascinating characters...He's as skilled as J.R.R. Tolkien and Frank Herbert... These are the books, along with a few others, that led me to write *Eragon*."
—Christopher Paolini

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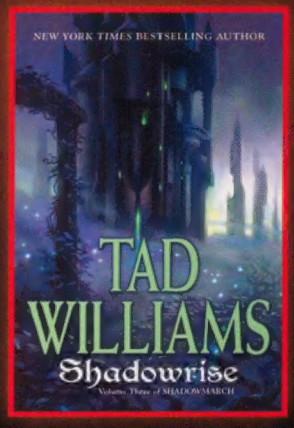

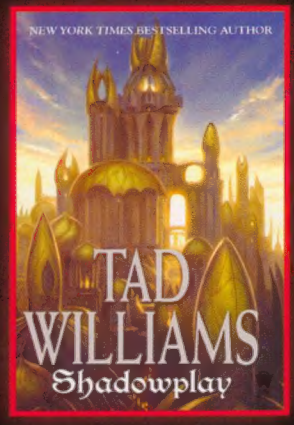

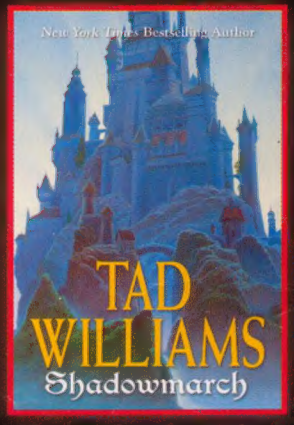

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